

In the mid-1980s, the Canadian art group General Idea (AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal) created a symbol using the acronym AIDS, boldly arranging the letters in a manner that resembled Robert Indiana's famous *LOVE* logo. This launched *Imagevirus*, a series of paintings, sculptures, videos, posters, exhibitions and ephemera that from 1987 to 1994 used the mechanism of viral transmission to investigate the term AIDS as both word and image.

In this book, artist and writer Gregg Bordowitz analyses *Imagevirus* from the perspective of his own involvement with activist art initiatives in New York during the 1980s and 90s. Considering the battles fought over sexuality and representation in those years, and through the lens of modernist literature (Gertrude Stein and William S. Burroughs), the author approaches the virus as idea, as tactic and as identity. Bordowitz explores how *Imagevirus* infected urban spaces across the world, offering a new model for artistic production, one strongly suited to ideological struggle.

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# General Idea *Imagevirus*

Gregg Bordowitz

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# General Idea *Imagevirus*

Gregg Bordowitz

I am grateful to Fern Bayer, whose research is the authoritative body upon which rests all scholarship concerning General Idea. The primary documents she provided me with were essential. Douglas Crimp and Lynne Tillman read the book's early treatments. Their encouragement and enthusiasm mattered tremendously. This manuscript would not exist without the friendship of Amy Sillman, who sheltered me in her Berlin apartment for two weeks, where I wrote the basis of my text. Ulrike Müller, too, offered necessary support – she read the very first draft endorsing my approach, and our ongoing conversation about poetry and painting was a strong factor. My assistant Tessa Siddle read the manuscript twice at subsequent stages, adding valuable research and insights. Kristine Woods accompanied me through the final navigations, giving me important feedback, and even constructing the desk on which this was finished. In conversations at social events, I frequently rehearsed the story of *Imagevirus*. Moyra Davey and Jason Simon listened attentively on more than one occasion. All the above helped shape my thinking and writing. The editors would also like to thank Fern Bayer and especially AA Bronson for their engagement with the project.

Gregg Bordowitz is a writer and artist. His films, including *Fast Trip Long Drop* (1993), *A Cloud In Trousers* (1995), *The Suicide* (1996) and *Habit* (2001) have been widely shown in festivals, museums and cinemas, and broadcast internationally. His book *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986–2003* was published by The MIT Press in 2004; for this collection, Bordowitz received the 2006 Frank Jewitt Mather Award from the College Art Association. Most recently, Printed Matter, New York published his artist book *Volition* (2009). He has received a Rockefeller Intercultural Arts Fellowship and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, among other grants and awards. Professor Bordowitz is the Chair of the Film, Video and New Media Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and he is on the faculty of the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York.

For AA Bronson, to whom I owe the greatest debt for  
his magnanimity and extraordinary example





cover and previous pages

General Idea,  
*AIDS Wallpaper*, 1990,  
screenprint on wallpaper,  
each roll (unrolled) 457 × 68.6cm

### Existence and Reflection

In 1987, at the height of the AIDS crisis, a group of three Canadian Conceptual artists living in New York produced what would become an iconic work of that period. The group was called General Idea, and by that time they had been working together for over twenty years. Their idea was simple. They took the letters of the acronym A-I-D-S, which stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and reorganised them into a logo. The letters 'A' and 'I' were placed on top of the letters 'D' and 'S', resembling the famous *LOVE* logo made by the artist Robert Indiana in 1966, and using the same red, blue and green colours. Together all the letters fit into a neat box. The negative space between the letters could be filled with diverse colour combinations, and the design allowed for numerous variations — in any medium, at any scale. From 1987 to 1994, General Idea reproduced their AIDS logo in many forms, including paintings, posters, videos and sculptures. They put it out in public on subway cars, walls and billboards all over the world.<sup>1</sup>

General Idea's title for this project — which includes every work, exhibition and public intervention that employed the logo — is *Imagevirus* (fig. 1—38). At the time of its production and distribution, *Imagevirus* caused mixed reactions: some people were greatly amused, others were confused and AIDS activists were infuriated. To this day, *Imagevirus* is recalled with a great deal of ambivalence.<sup>2</sup>

Consider the logo. Turning LOVE into AIDS seems to draw some kind of causal connection between a powerful human emotion and a deadly disease. Love is perhaps the most celebrated human emotion — it involves intense intimacy and can incorporate all kinds of sexuality. AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, for which in the late 1980s there were no effective treatments.<sup>3</sup> A diagnosis meant almost certain death. During the early years

of the AIDS epidemic, the association between love and death was on the minds of many people, and the mental connection between love and death is nothing new. For example, in the history of myth, both gods and humans have suffered painful deaths for their ill-conceived affairs of the heart and/or sexual excesses. Great works of art, often drawing from myth, have also attested to the proximity of love and death, and in the modern period the intimate connection between sexual desire and the death drive is a central theme in psychoanalytic theory.<sup>4</sup> So, why was *Imagevirus* such a challenging work of art?

The answer to that question can be found in the history of identity politics. Those who were first visibly affected and hardest hit by AIDS in North America and Europe were male homosexuals. In the early 1980s, despite years of activist struggle to end oppression, homosexuality was (and still is) a deeply stigmatised aspect of human sexuality. This struggle has a long history: modern sexual liberation movements began in the late nineteenth century with Magnus Hirshfeld's efforts in Germany for homosexual emancipation, and the years after World War II saw enormous progress in the struggle for civil rights, including the rights of lesbians and gays. In the US, the Mattachine Society, founded in 1950, was one of the earliest organisations to fight homosexual discrimination. By the 1970s, the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activist Alliance, among many other groups, secured great advances in the fight for sexual liberation.<sup>5</sup> At first, the AIDS crisis seemed to halt all progress. It reinvigorated deep-seated homophobic fears, causing a severe backlash against lesbian and gay communities. During the AIDS crisis, sexual minorities entered a new period of struggle. Queer people became extremely vulnerable scapegoats, blamed directly for the appearance of a new, rapidly spreading disease. This was the context into which General Idea inserted *Imagevirus* — into a battlefield.

To understand what happened after three Canadian Conceptualists came to New York during the worst public health crisis of the twentieth century, and why they produced one of the strangest and most stunning works of art about AIDS, we will have to juggle social studies, art history, psychology, politics and poetry. It is a beautiful story, a sad story, and it is not entirely over yet. It is the story of the twentieth-century bohemian avant-garde. It begins with a group of artists, no one knows how many for sure, who lived together and worked together to dismantle the boundaries between author and audience, to dissolve the very separation between art and life. A group of collaborators melded into one unit, achieving a singular group mind, each doing whatever he or she wanted, all under the same name, one identity for all to inhabit. They established a community where everyone was an artist with total creative freedom in one unified global village!

Is it true? Did it happen? Not exactly, but the situation described in the above paragraph, with a little bit of implied irony and a larger amount of jealousy, was indeed the aspiration of many artists and artists' groups during the twentieth century. And from what I have read and heard, the group General Idea was formed in this mould. Known today primarily as a Conceptual art team of three gay men, General Idea actually had its roots in the Canadian communal counterculture of the 1960s, in alternative living arrangements in which shifting numbers of men and women, anywhere from ten to sixty, cohabited in lofts and raw spaces, living their art as theatre, experimenting with gender, kink and polymorphous perversity. These households coalesced in Winnipeg, Montreal and Vancouver to collapse and reform themselves in varying arrangements in the city of Toronto, where a collection of like-minded, politically disillusioned, anti-art pranksters found themselves living together, staging plays, making books, designing absurd window

displays, playing dress-up at parties and staging pageants. Who specifically came up with the name General Idea is lost to history. And that is appropriate, because the story we are telling here is about impulses that emerge out of the ether, lifting the spirits of rebel souls to disappear into other dimensions.<sup>6</sup>

The story of General Idea is complicated. And, unfortunately, I will not get to tell the entire epic here. My mandate is to focus specifically on the one project titled *Imagevirus* which, as described above, was actually a complicated series of feints and gestures enacted within the art world long after General Idea had settled into a three-man unit.<sup>7</sup> The many forms that *Imagevirus* took — paintings, posters, print advertisements, sculpture... — were General Idea's means of coping with the challenges posed by the AIDS epidemic as it decimated whole populations throughout the 1980s. That is another story I must contend with here: the story of living with AIDS. This story includes the emergence of the disease, the reasons why it became a crisis and how that crisis affected the lives of the three artists in General Idea.

Up until now, I have been writing this book as if you, the reader, are unfamiliar with General Idea, homosexuality and the AIDS crisis. You may have noticed that the writing has progressed (or regressed) in tone, from an objective voice to a more personal one. It is difficult for me to remain measured and objective, because I am not calm. This material holds a great deal of personal significance for me. I am a long-time survivor of AIDS, an AIDS activist and an artist who has devoted his life to making work about the epidemic. Still, I must write this text with some amount of distance. I need to understand the story I am telling; I need to deliver this story as if I were re-telling it to a stranger. At times, that stranger will be

myself, because the story remains incomprehensible to me. This is actually a number of converging stories that are tremendously difficult to synthesise.

Let me tell you, as if you didn't already know, that living with AIDS is very complicated. When you are informed by a health counsellor that you have been infected with HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus, the retrovirus that causes AIDS, what do you know? You know that you need to treat your infection, and that, if you have the resources, there are medications to prolong your life. The drugs won't cure your disease, and AIDS will eventually compromise your immune system to the point of death (if something else doesn't kill you first). After you are infected, you know that you are infectious to others. You are always aware that if you are not careful, you can transmit the disease to other bodies. You become acutely conscious that you exist as an organism with permeable boundaries.

There is more. HIV infection sets into motion an endless set of questions about life and death, pleasure and pain, what is real and what is imagined. You discover that there are no definitive answers to your questions, and realise that you can only have a general idea about anything — whatever you know you can only know in general.

I am playing with the notion of 'general idea' to explore the relevance of the locution to the name of a creative team who for over thirty years worked together as they lived together, producing an enormous number of art projects, until two of its three members, Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz, died from AIDS in 1994.<sup>8</sup> AA Bronson is the third surviving member, and today he manages the many shows of General Idea's work around the world.<sup>9</sup>



Throughout their entire career, General Idea explored the ambiguity of language as a material. All of their projects played with the fundamental instability of meaning and the limited means we have available to convey the full complexity of thought. With their project *Imagevirus*, General Idea elaborated upon the distribution and public presence of the acronym A-I-D-S, and they bravely faced the contingencies of disease: mortality, their own lives and the lives of those around them, the ways that language can and cannot alter the course of an epidemic.

AIDS. How did AIDS enter into language? The first acronym used to describe the disease was GRID — Gay Related Immune Deficiency. That acronym was abandoned when it became clear that AIDS did not exclusively affect gay people. Groups identified as high risk for AIDS in the earliest days of the epidemic included injection-drug users, poor people, some racial minorities and Haitians. Medical surveillance established the high-risk groups among some of the most vulnerable minorities in society, people who suffered tremendously from prejudice and stigma. Perhaps that is the reason why, whatever the medical name, AIDS was for many an unspeakable disease until it proliferated into a massive, visible crisis. To start this enquiry I must ask a fundamental question: what exactly is AIDS? I should be able to tell you, as I have been living with AIDS for over twenty years. But I can't.

To understand AIDS as a disease we can study epidemiology — trace the origins of the virus that causes AIDS and produce a picture of an epidemic. That has been done elsewhere, the assignment is different here.<sup>10</sup> When trying to answer the question at hand, a split occurs within me, a division between knowing and being. That fissure widens along rifts separating the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the

irrational, history and prehistory. To better understand AIDS we can ask questions like: what is the meaning of the word illness? How is the concept of illness applied in daily life? How is the concept of art related to the concept of illness? How did the word 'AIDS' come to signify all that it means? This line of questioning is an inquest, a judicial enquiry, a detective story. A typical detective story often starts with the fact of a death. The drama unfolds as a whodunnit: there is nothing except the 'how' of it, which includes identifying a culprit by deducing a motive and perhaps the method of a murder. Who was killed and why? How did the acronym AIDS become an identity? How did AIDS turn into art for some? How did General Idea arrive at its own creative response to AIDS?

Should I approach this problem like a detective — deeply interested, fascinated even, but also cold, dispassionate, methodical and only proceeding from the facts at hand? Actually, every detective has a past, usually a deep, painful secret at the origin of his calling. Suspicion drives the investigation, and every good detective goes with a gut feeling. His or her imagination identifies with both the victim and the murderer. Psychological profiles are developed as an all-encompassing picture of the situation is elaborated. We can't do that here. There are accounts explaining how AIDS became a crisis through stigma and prejudice. The social causes of AIDS and the failure of US governmental policy to adequately address the emerging epidemic with an appropriate amount of resources have been documented and discussed widely.<sup>11</sup> During the 1980s, the AIDS activist movement formed in the US and globally to advocate on behalf of those infected with HIV, but the AIDS crisis is still unfolding. This is an unfinished history, still being written.

Today, as a person with AIDS, I constantly ask all kinds of maddening questions to cope with uncertainty. 'Why do I have

AIDS?’ is an unanswerable question that nags at me from the fringes of my consciousness. ‘How do I live with AIDS?’ is a question I must ask daily in order to practically go about the business of self-care. To understand AIDS and art, I must travel down several paths. First, AIDS has had a profound impact on global society, and, since the beginning of the epidemic in the 1980s, the disease and its crises have served as the focus of much art production. Second, to live with AIDS requires a kind of grace, a practice of living. It is an art. To live with AIDS you mourn, you lose countless loved ones, you lose a sense of self. You swallow pills. Actually, you may need to fight for access to medical treatment. Rare medications keep the body alive, while their side effects make it sick. Living with AIDS means to weaken and die, and to see others do the same. It feels like a contest among runners, horses, perhaps racing cars. These are just some of the images that come to my mind. Sometimes, I imagine AIDS as an enormous institutional building — like a hospital, a church — with thousands of rooms within rooms, a catacomb structure that takes lifetimes to comprehend.

My description above of a split, a fissure, a rift is an attempt to account for two different ways of placing yourself in your own body, and establishing a context for your own existence. You can look at yourself in the mirror and adjust your clothing. Or, you can stand in the street feeling the wind on your face as you close your eyes to breathe in the fresh air. These two ways of orienting yourself seem opposed, or at the very least substantially different. How this distinction arose, I do not know. But I will argue that General Idea considered the many forms of AIDS in ways that reconcile a kind of split between cognition and being. As a sign, as art, to know how AIDS manifested as a subject for General Idea’s artwork, one must encompass all the forms the acronym AIDS can take. That is exactly what General Idea did with *Imagevirus*.

Some time in the mid-1980s, one of the three members of General Idea (we don’t know which one) had a vision: to make a symbol using a re-figured version of the acronym AIDS with its letters rearranged to resemble Robert’s Indiana’s famous *LOVE* from the Pop era (fig.39).<sup>12</sup> All three members of General Idea initially had serious doubts about this AIDS image. At first blush, the idea was abandoned. Turning L-O-V-E into A-I-D-S seemed offensive, especially when close friends of the artists were at that very moment dying. By that time, the AIDS epidemic had become recognised as an international epidemic. In North America gay men were disproportionately affected. In New York City, the epicentre of the epidemic in the US and the place where General Idea was then living and working, many believed that homophobia was one of the primary reasons for the US government’s wilful neglect of the populations hardest hit by AIDS. The ‘high-risk groups’ — gay men, drug users, people of colour and the poor — were all historically stigmatised, excluded from social services and resources, and considered to be outside of the ‘general public’. Of course, these divisions are artificially constructed terms of exclusion. For example, poverty is disproportionately high among people of colour, but poverty is not an essential condition of race. You could be black and gay and a drug user and female. Or you could have AIDS and not be part of any high-risk group.

There were many root causes for the hostile response to people with AIDS. I think people who weren’t close to the groups most affected, and also people within the groups most affected, wanted to distance themselves from the epidemic, as if HIV could be contained along established lines of social exclusion. Homophobia dominated media representations and public consciousness concerning AIDS, but in spite of that, or maybe because of that, General Idea could not let go of the *AIDS* logo even if it epitomised bad taste. More significantly, *Imagevirus*

violated the imperatives of AIDS activist art, which emerged during those years around ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), founded in 1987 as a militant direct-action group formed to fight government neglect.<sup>13</sup> Activist artists were primarily focused on providing safer-sex education and fighting for life-saving medical treatments. So, why was General Idea eventually compelled to make *Imagevirus*?

Imagine the three artists sitting at a table. It is a regular work meeting. They know each other extremely well. They have lived and worked together for around twenty years. Recently, they have moved their base to New York City, a place they had decided was the best location to manage their well-established international art career. And it seemed to work. By the late 1980s the General Idea team was widely recognised as one of the leading exponents of a version of Conceptual art that encompassed all kinds of production — magazines, videos, performances, sculptures, paintings, etc. General Idea was part of a larger international art movement — including artists as divergent as Gilbert & George, Joseph Kosuth, Adrian Piper, Hanne Darboven and Bruce Nauman — emphasising the role of ideas over form. For many artists working in the 1960s and 70s, ideas could take many forms and be distributed through media of mass communication, like advertising.

So, Jorge Zontal, Felix Partz and AA Bronson are sitting at the table, and one of them has *the* idea. Which one? Who knows? Does it matter? Ideas emerge through discussion, and this idea is an emergent property of the group. Once identified as a common object to share and elaborate, the group elevates the idea to the status of a project. They give it a name — *Imagevirus*. Once named, ideas beget tactics, but I am getting ahead of myself. The notion of the virus as a tactic will be considered later.

For now, I must focus on AIDS as an idea — an evil idea in possession of a magnificent formal perfection. Disease possesses several qualities we associate with ideal aesthetic forms: precision, simplicity and cruelty. Precision is a quality of design that entered into hard-edge abstract painting, from industrialism into modernism and eventually into Robert Indiana's *LOVE*. Simplicity is a quality attributed to the most graceful forms in fashion, design, architecture and even mathematics — all come together in something like the steel and glass skyscrapers of Mies van der Rohe. Cruelty became a principle of theatre with Antonin Artaud:

*The theatre must give us everything that is crime, love, war or madness, if it wants to recover its necessity.*

*Everyday love, personal ambition, struggles for status, all have value only in proportion to their relation to the terrible lyricism of the Myths to which the great mass of men have assented.*<sup>14</sup>

It is important to understand that General Idea drew influences from all these areas in their art — all forms, ideals and disciplines could be appropriated in the service of their ends. The *AIDS* logo with its crisp lines, bold colours and multiple iterations served General Idea's vision of aesthetic perfection.

The primary idea guiding their decisions for *Imagevirus* was that of the virus. AIDS is a mindless repetition, an automatic self-reproduction. Emotionless, without conscience or consciousness, inhuman. A force of nature. Viral diseases are testaments to a vast cosmological indifference. They prove that nature doesn't hold individual life too dear. Beings are born, and they die.

The virus is perceived as an ideal form, like a pure idea. A oneness infinitely repeatable as both one and many-all-the-same. In each new cell that a virus infects it makes more of itself. Among the many qualities a virus possesses is more-of-the-same. That is the imperative of a virus — more virus. I use the word ‘possess’ repeatedly here, possibly revealing some kind of demonic force I imagine at work within the virus. In spite of education, in defiance of reason, I imagine demiurges and evil spirits.

Molecules or spirits, these strands of proteins attach, float and bind. They conjugate to exchange genetic material. It is delicious to describe the phenomenon of viral infection, because it seems to describe so much about communication. William Burroughs is believed to have said: ‘Language is a virus from outer space.’ And while that idea is certainly the animating concept underlying most of his writings, I cannot locate that particular quote anywhere in his writing. Perhaps my methods of scholarship are lacking, but I like the idea that ‘language is a virus from outer space’ enters into the popular consciousness as a statement without a locatable citation. Suppose it just emerged from the body of Burroughs’s writings, bubbling out of his texts to circulate among us endlessly?<sup>15</sup>

The idea of a virus can be deployed as a tactic. *Imagevirus* was an ongoing project, executed by General Idea for six years. The methods used in *Imagevirus* were the logical extensions of the group’s early intellectual commitments. In fact, the members of General Idea were greatly influenced by the notion of the virus as it was developed by Burroughs. Burroughs’s novels from the 1950s and 60s, such as *Naked Lunch* (1959), *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962) and *Nova Express* (1964), examined and embraced language, drug addiction and homosexuality as viral forms lurking in the gap between life and death. For Burroughs, the virus was a soft machine: it survived by

parasitic attachment to organic matter, transforming living tissue into inert material. Fear and paranoia were the substance of Burroughs’s art, conceived during the Cold War, marked by the polar opposition between the United States and the USSR. Both capitalism and communism seemed to require the suppression of the homosexual, and queer Burroughs attempted to break free of all kinds of soul-killing conformity. He attacked both corporate capitalism and state-sponsored communism by unleashing the infectious potential of homosexual desire.

Burroughs gave General Idea a well-developed imaginary cosmos in which viral infection is *the* creative principle. His literature offered a genre-bending, sexually violent, pornographic science-fiction universe ruled by the principle of constant mutation. In this universe, the virus is a cause with unknown origins. It moves from body to body as part of a vast conspiracy too complex for any single consciousness to comprehend. This metaphysical version of biological phenomena is conjoined by Burroughs with the image of invading alien forces at war with governments and human institutions of all kinds. The body of Burroughs’s writings that General Idea devoured was all composed and published in the 1950s and 60s, well before the AIDS crisis. Yet, Burroughs’s books of that period seem to predict the AIDS crisis precisely, and to prefigure all the conspiratorial fantasies that arose to explain its appearance.

That Burroughs is a key influential literary figure for General Idea is apparent when you consider how they adapted the metaphors of his literature in their work. However, to get a fuller, more comprehensive and accurate picture of *Imagevirus* we must consider other literary models, brought in by fellow travellers and early participants in General Idea’s work. Three women had significant roles in the earliest formations of the group, when it was a larger, more amorphous collective: Mimi



Paige, Granada Gazelle and Honey Novick. It was these women, particularly Gazelle, who introduced another key lexicon into the nascent intellectual development of General Idea — lesbian modernist literature, especially Djuna Barnes, the author of the novel *Nightwood* (1936).

*An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties.*<sup>16</sup>

There is no citation more apt to the task at hand, no definition of an image more accurate for our purposes, than the above quotation. What General Idea truly did with AIDS was to take hold of its form as a word-image and subject the acronym itself to the most powerful microscopic scrutiny possible in the field of art. They did this by inhabiting so many different formats with *Imagevirus* — not only painting, sculpture, installation, wallpaper, etc., but also art discourse. General Idea took the abbreviated name of a virus often invoked alongside moral invectives against people with AIDS — homosexuals, drug users, poor people, people of colour, the most vulnerable and stigmatised in society — and rendered it amoral. They went Kabbalistic on the word, cracked it open to reveal the limitless significance of the thing. They opened the word to both revelation and revolution.

The AIDS logo designed by General Idea was intended to be that kind of ‘stop the mind makes between uncertainties’, a pause between insufficient knowledge and tenuous being. And General Idea’s *AIDS* logo extended Burroughs’s tactics into the field of fine art precisely at the moment that the epidemic became a battleground for meaning. Because in the late 1980s there was a massive public panic about the very meaning of the deadly disease. All the political battles around how and to what extent care for the sick could be provided were pitched around moral debates concerning sexuality and drug use and whether punishment was deserved. The moral arguments veiled deeper

— class — contradictions: at the bottom of it all was a battle over resources. In the US, private corporate healthcare rendered necessary medical treatments beyond the means of most people with AIDS.

*Word begets image and image is virus.*<sup>17</sup>

Morality combined with anxiety over resources is exactly what Burroughs meant by his concept of the ‘algebra of need’, which repeatedly surfaces in his literature.<sup>18</sup> The ‘algebra of need’ is a calculation no less complex, and no less resolvable, than a pure mathematical formula for desire. We may think that we can understand desire if we regard the problem of need with cold analysis and quantitative methods. But it is not that simple. The junkie needs one thing: junk. He needs more and more junk. That is what makes him vulnerable to the manipulations of the pusher, a figure who stands in for all kinds of greed. The junkie wants more and more, and the pusher is there to give it to him. But the pusher takes — he takes more than he gives. He dispenses junk in exchange for all that the junkie has got. Eventually the junkie gives himself up entirely to his need. Burroughs referred to this craven desire as his ‘sickness’, a complicated notion that also enfolds sexual desire. Junkies live for junk and sex, they are queer for a fix. Burroughs ‘queers’ addiction. All of his erotic and amorous desires are absorbed into his ‘algebra of need’. Crushes, friendships, intimacies and sex — all the many connections and encounters of Burroughs’s characters are factors of his ‘algebra’.

Burroughs’s maths are screwy. The self-proclaimed ‘Master Addict’ tells us: ‘Junk is quantitative and accurately measurable. The more junk you use the less you have and the more you have the more you use.’<sup>19</sup> But the cosmic joke of junk is that all use adds up to zero. An empty circular existence. The junkie moves from zero

to infinity with all his attention paid to measurement in terms of dose and frequency of injections, ingestion ... mouths, holes, cocks ... all mixed up in a profusion of endless mutating molecular processes. Ultimately, the junkie stops counting to become a connoisseur of quality.

The 'high' itself is a quality. Burroughs describes himself high, spending eight hours watching his shoe.<sup>20</sup> He describes that period as dead time, yet we know by his own account that he wrote much of the material for *Naked Lunch* while he was high, and that he claimed he didn't remember writing any of it.<sup>21</sup> His writing production was not quantitative. The moment of being high was a suspension of duration. A dreamworld with no volume, no mass, nothing measurable in feet or minutes. 'A stop the mind makes between uncertainties,' between want and need.

So Burroughs's 'algebra of need' was actually a qualitative description.<sup>22</sup> Algebra seems an odd choice because it is about logic, not sensation. Burroughs merged the rational with the irrational in his observations and fantasies. It is true that addiction has a cold logic and that desire has a formulaic nature. A fix is quantitative: a dose, a unit. Sex is repetitious and predictable. Yet, both drug use and sex stop time, leave the body feeling suspended, not tied to this earth. Altered states of consciousness, delusion, derangement — these are all ways to achieve a radically fresh purchase on reality, as pioneered by a Romantic figure like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, or a modern one like Charles Baudelaire.

Mathematical calculation and formulas are also time-honoured means of glimpsing beyond the world's common appearances. Jewish mystics assign a numerical value to each letter of the alphabet and then count total values of words, coming up with long lists of seemingly unrelated words that possess the same

value. Looking for words with a specific value can possibly lead to secret combinations and hidden messages.

Burroughs also used formulas and chance operations to write. He often used a surgical method. Instructions: cut down the middle of two pages from two different books and splice two halves together; align the severed halves of sentences to make new hybrid sentences; look for hidden meanings in chance combinations; abandon old meanings and interpretations altogether in favour of a sensory relation to language; create a new relation to the text, one that feels utterly original. By moving between the rational and the irrational, sometimes choosing one over the other, Burroughs sought revelation in calculated methods to achieve a perverse logic.

General Idea's *Imagevirus* followed a similar generative procedure. Jumble the letters of the acronym AIDS, and realign them into a logo that resembles but does not reproduce an already established pattern. Repeat the new word-image endlessly. By recombining the letters of the AIDS acronym, General Idea applied a fundamental tactic of the virus: confusion. Viruses mutate, they change their composition. Ultimately, there is no reason for the four letters of the acronym to spell out *that* word, the word that stands for the disease. The re-figured AIDS acronym suggests, but does not spell out LOVE, nor AIDS. It is nonsense.

AI  
DS

Repetition is another vital tactic of the virus. Copied endlessly, the *Imagevirus* infects large portions of the signifying field. It skips boundaries and connects gallery to museum to street to public transportation. A grid of *Imagevirus* posters appears

on the wooden wall of an urban construction site; *Imagevirus* logos cover the tram in Amsterdam; *Imagevirus* shines up in lights high above New York's Times Square; in a gallery the walls are covered with *Imagevirus* wallpaper; the logo as a large, block-letter sculpture rests upon a pedestal in the middle of a public square in Hamburg; sitting on the subway there is the logo taking up advertising space. The permeability of boundaries among and between media allows *Imagevirus* to reproduce everywhere.

If you are a person with AIDS standing on the street corner facing the *Imagevirus*, you may feel differently than the casual passer-by. Imagine Joe Average, comfortable in his self-assured posture, safe in the assumption that neither he nor anyone he knows is the kind of person that could get sick. But, if you have the sickness, then the *Imagevirus* is an extension of you. You are the word made flesh, a representative of the virus, and your reach extends deep into the atmosphere. Breathe in, feel your power.

Did I ever allow myself to feel that way in the 1980s? When I contracted HIV did it ever occur to me to feel my infection as a form of power? Wresting control of AIDS meant gaining mastery of the language used to describe it. I talked about AIDS obsessively. For years it was the only subject for me. Identity is a form of repetition.

### Repetition and Format

*Everyone then has a history in them by the repeating that comes from them. There are some who will have sometime the whole repeating of each one they have around them, they will have the whole history of each one, there is repeating then always in every one, there is a repeating*

*always of the kinds of all women and men. There is repeating then always in every one; that makes a history of each one coming out of them.*<sup>23</sup>

Gertrude Stein understood that making a picture, like achieving an identity, is a process of repetition. One must place layer upon layer of significance to make a surface. The job requires that the artist pay full attention to every aspect of the current historical circumstances, to all conditions governing every mode of production. The work of art is a singular being fashioned by the accretion of all its possibilities — historical, technological and psychological.

The artist makes art by assuming one disposition toward everything. A growing record of her observations becomes the picture of everything she touches throughout the world. Her touch is the connecting tissue among things. For Stein, art must be a description of something in particular, and at the same time it must be something commonly found everywhere all at once. Whatever it is, it must differ significantly from other things, as well as itself, in varying contexts, and always be recognisable as something particularly special.

That is what the work of art is in Stein's literature. Art is a species of thing, like people. She knew that each person is unique, and yet she also knew that we are all the same, rushing about, eating, sleeping, waking, working and dying. For Stein, anybody could read (or write) the very same autobiography. In fact, she wrote a book for all readers, titled *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937). With that book as well as the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), a work she herself authored under the name of her wife (they weren't married, they couldn't possibly have married during their lifetimes, but that is what Alice was to Gertrude), Stein understood that autobiography is more than a genre.

Autobiography is a kind of pattern through which any person can read about themselves.

Stein's approach to the autobiography as template is similar to, and perhaps a precedent for, General Idea's notion of 'format', a model for a kind of experience.<sup>24</sup> *The New Oxford American Dictionary* defines 'format' as:

- *the way in which something is arranged or set out:* the format of the funeral service.
- *the shape, size and presentation of a book or periodical.*
- *the medium in which a sound recording is made available:* the album is available as a CD as well as on LP and cassette formats.
- *computing a defined structure for the processing, storage or display of data:* a data file in binary format.<sup>25</sup>

All aspects of this definition apply to the way General Idea adopted the notion of format as the principal concept underlying all its art production. The 'Miss General Idea Pageants', which took place from the late 1960s into the early 70s, were staged as if they were being captured live for television broadcast. Video cameras were present to cover the pageant, but there was no live feed or broadcast. (None of the tapes have actually survived.) Whether or not the pageant was actually broadcast wasn't as important as the fact that the event was being executed in the format of a live television show. A live television show is not the same as a stage play or film shoot — it is an event being performed before an audience and for a larger group of viewers who observe the event from a geographical distance. The television audience at the event plays a role for the at-home television-viewing audience. The whole situation is mediated by the electronic medium.

For General Idea the notion of a format was a total sensory experience of the thing at hand — the scale, scope, proportion, feel, taste, tone and texture of the thing as it was presented to experience. The format was the 'event' of the thing, whether it was an object or a performance. Actually, the distinction between object and performance broke down as they were unified through the notion of the format. AA Bronson told me about an early theatrical experiment General Idea did in 1970 as part of the festival of underground theatre in Toronto, at a time when General Idea was still a group of indeterminate number.<sup>26</sup> The project lasted a week and included events and an ongoing changing installation in the lobby, a performance titled 'The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant' and a presentation in the theatre. This presentation consisted of a screening showing documentation of a reading of Gertrude Stein's play *What Happened: A Play* (1913), made without audience, props, set or performative component. The audience in the theatre was shown this documentation, while the video was simultaneously screened on a monitor in the lobby, erasing any distinction and therefore hierarchy between stage and non-stage. In this way, the play was framed as a 'play format' and presented as such. *What Happened* is about the experience of a party comprehended as a series of events set into a pattern:

*A birthday, what is a birthday, a birthday is a speech,  
it is a second time when there is tobacco, it is only one  
time when there is poison. It is more than one time when  
the occasion which shows an occasional sharp separation  
is unanimous.*<sup>27</sup>

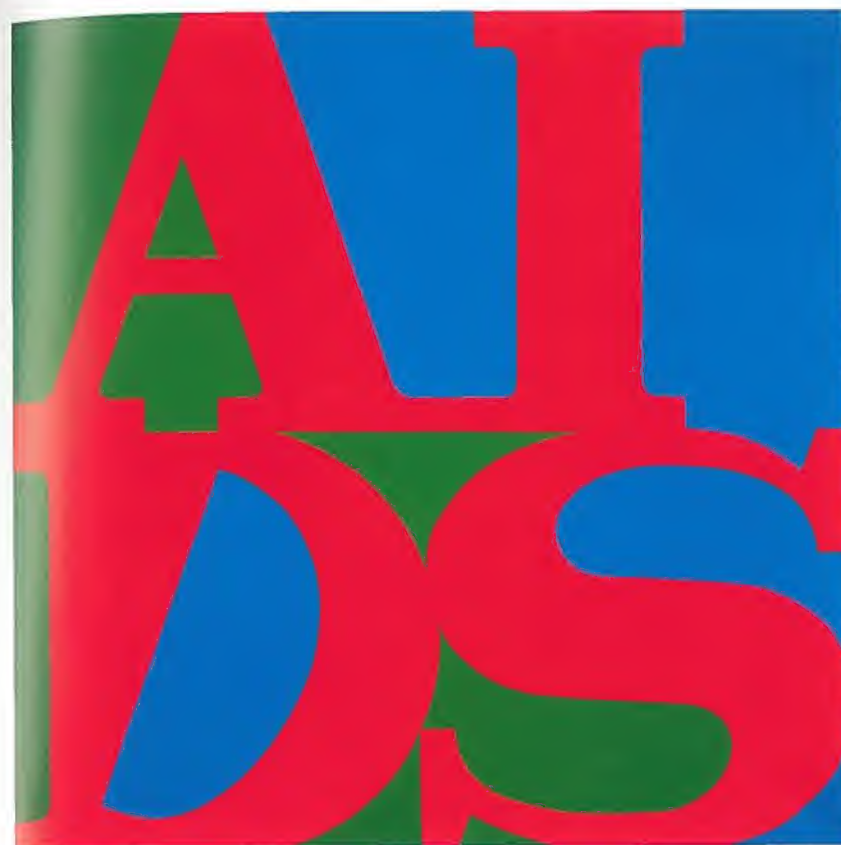
*FILE Magazine* is another great example of General Idea's use of formats. The early issues of the magazine, which was produced from 1972 to 1989, combined appropriated images, texts and layouts from mainstream post-War and contemporary media



— what they called ‘found formats’ — with readers’ submissions riffing on popular culture, all of it organised utilising design strategies culled also from various media. *FILE* is an anagram of *LIFE*, a magazine whose look they stole for the cover of their own magazine. Anagrams, puns and wordplay were all part of the modern art tool kit: Dada did it, or think of Marcel Duchamp. Anagrams, puns and acrostics (a kind of poem that John Cage mastered) all have meanings and messages embedded just beneath the surface of their appearances. They are used by mystics, spies, insurgents and artists to smuggle content past the censors, both real and imagined.

I see the letters A-I-D-S organised into a logo. Does it mean what I think it means? What does it signal? It is a ravaged body; it is mourning-sadness-tears-shaking-sobbing bodies; it is thousands of people protesting. AIDS is a social phenomenon and as such repeatedly enters into the field of representation, always as something else, recombined, with new meanings. The direct experience of AIDS exceeds representation. AIDS is always more than an image — it is an appearance, a visitation, a demonic possession with all the sensual qualities (smells, tastes, temperatures and tones) that accompany intense encounters and limit experiences. Can the experience of living with AIDS be reduced to a format?

In the late 1980s, AIDS was everywhere. The acronym spread across the sensory field to cover the major and minor organs of all media. A symbol of death, a sign with a set of moral judgments appended, that acronym was the signal of a vast conspiracy. AIDS, the disease, seemed to arrive like some alien force determined to wipe out the human population, or maybe just to target specific groups. Some religious zealots promulgated the idea that AIDS was God’s punishment against homosexuals. Other people, many within the communities hardest hit by



1. General Idea,  
AIDS, 1987,  
acrylic on canvas,  
182.9 × 182.9cm  
Private collection  
Photograph: Zindman/Fremont



2. General Idea,  
*AIDS*, 1987,  
 screenprint on paper,  
 76.2 × 76.2cm  
 Edition of 80 + 7 AP and 3 HC,  
 signed and numbered  
 Published by Koury Wingate  
 Gallery, New York  
 Courtesy Koury Wingate Gallery



3. General Idea,  
*AIDS*, 1987,  
 screenprint on paper,  
 68.4 × 68.5cm  
 Edition of 1,000, unnumbered  
 Published by Koury Wingate  
 Gallery, New York

Poster with printed signature  
 and (copyright) date '© 1987'  
 Hundreds were put up on the streets of  
 New York in November 1987 (pictured)  
 and San Francisco in January 1988  
 Photograph: the artists





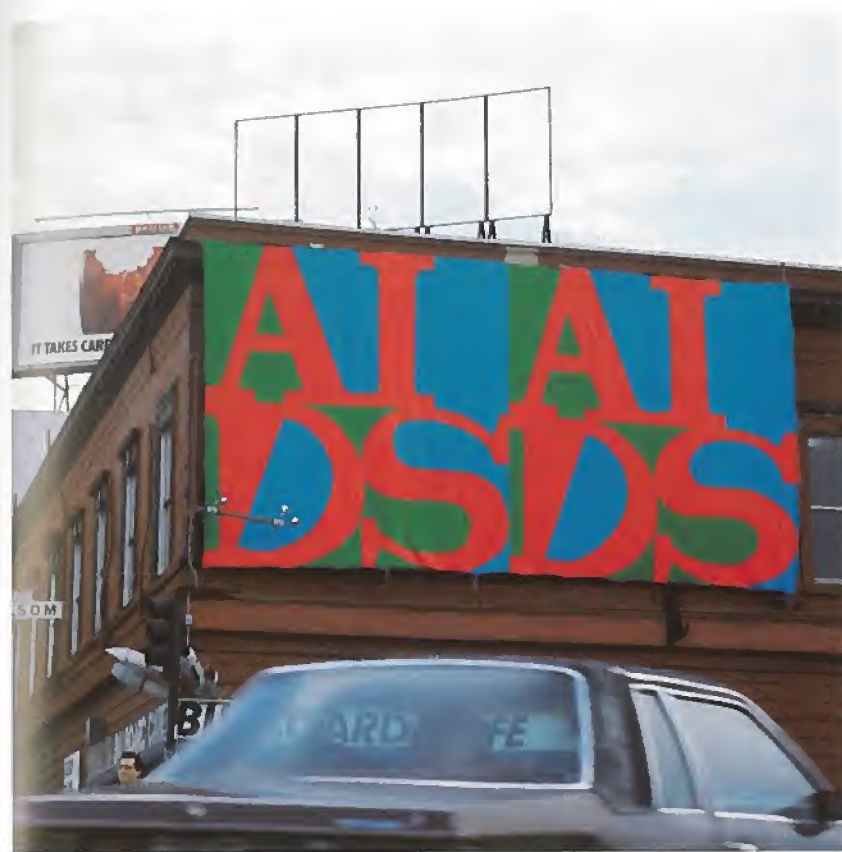
4. General Idea,  
series of *AIDS* paintings,  
installation view at Koury Wingate  
Gallery, New York, 1988  
Photograph: Zindman/Fremont

From left to right:  
*AIDS* (Cadmium Green Light),  
*AIDS* (Ultramarine Blue),  
*AIDS* (Cadmium Orange Light),  
*AIDS* (Lascaux Green Light) and  
*AIDS* (Permanent Rose Deep),  
all 1988, acrylic on canvas,  
243.7 × 243.7cm



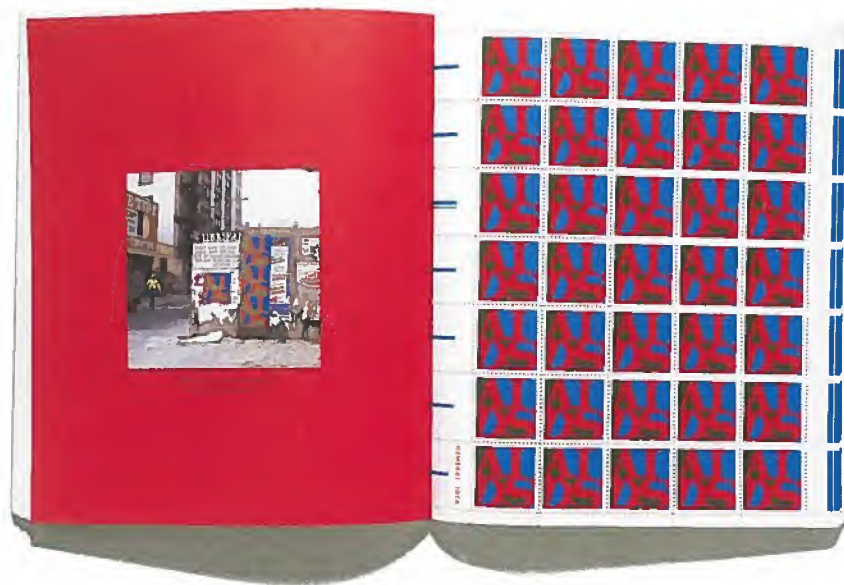
5. General Idea,  
*AIDS*, 1988,  
 offset on paper,  
 59.3 × 59.6cm  
 Edition size unknown,  
 some signed, unnumbered  
 Published by YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto

Poster with printed signature and  
 (copyright) date '© 1987'  
 Thousands were put up on the streets  
 of Toronto in May–June 1988 and  
 Berlin later that year (pictured,  
 S-Bahnhof Westend)  
 Photograph: the artists



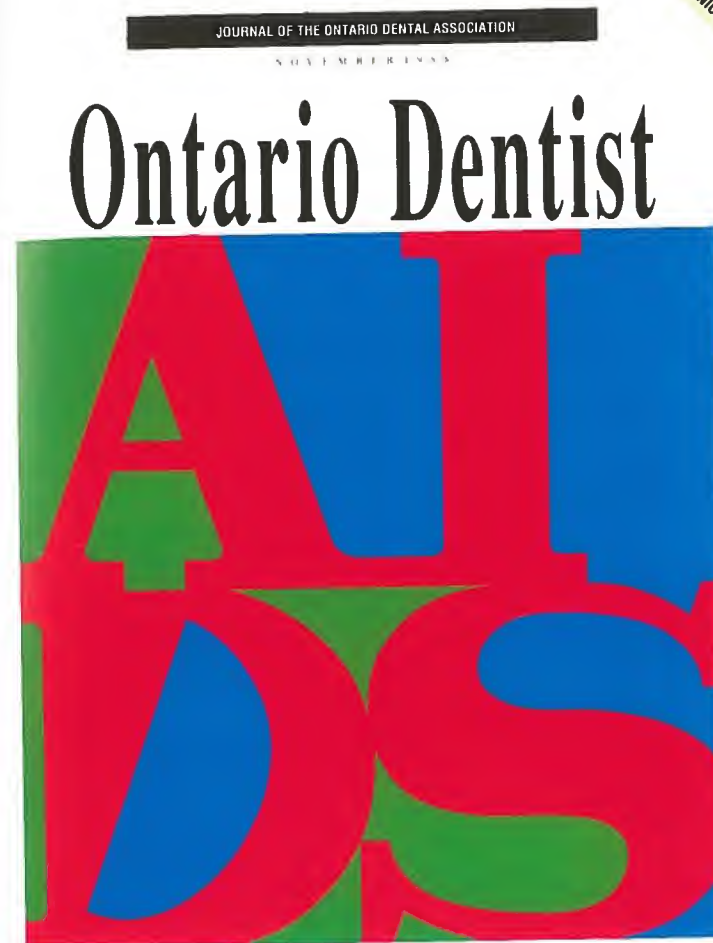
6. General Idea,  
*AIDS (billboard)*, 1988,  
 acrylic on vinyl, 304 × 609cm  
 Installation, Billboard Café,  
 San Francisco  
 Photograph: the artists





7. General Idea,  
*AIDS Stamps*, 1988,  
offset on perforated paper,  
four sheets, insert in *Parkett*,  
no.15, 1988, pp.117–27,  
25.5 × 21cm

Edition size unknown,  
unsigned and unnumbered  
Published by *Parkett*, Zurich  
Photograph: Peter MacCallum



## WHAT YOU MUST KNOW

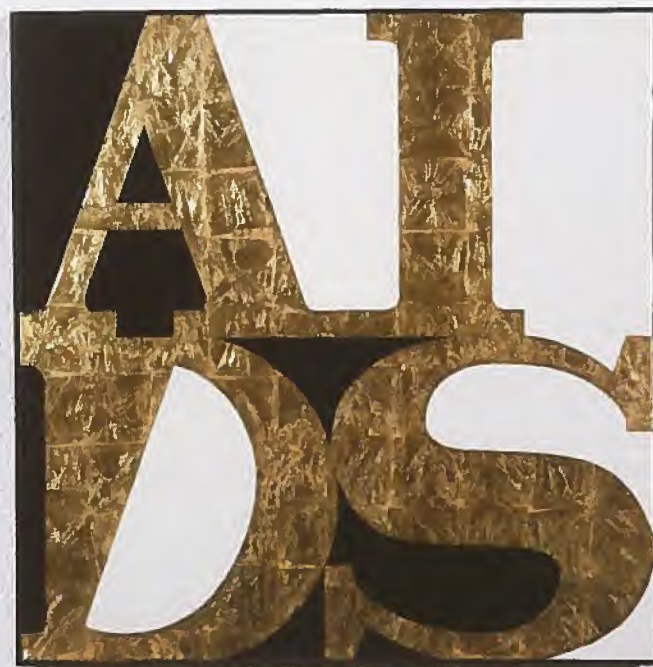
8. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Project for Ontario Dentist)*, 1988,  
offset on paper, cover for *Ontario Dentist*:  
*Journal of the Ontario Dental Association*,  
vol.65, no.9, November 1988,  
27.5 × 20.6cm

Edition size unknown,  
unsigned and unnumbered  
Published by Ontario Dental  
Association, Toronto  
Photograph: Peter MacCallum



9. General Idea,  
*Classic AIDS*, 1988,  
two rear-illuminated colour  
photo-transparencies, with  
window painted a flat warm red,  
each 121.9 × 121.9cm

Installation view,  
New Museum, New York  
Collection of Whitney Museum  
of American Art, New York  
Photograph: the artists

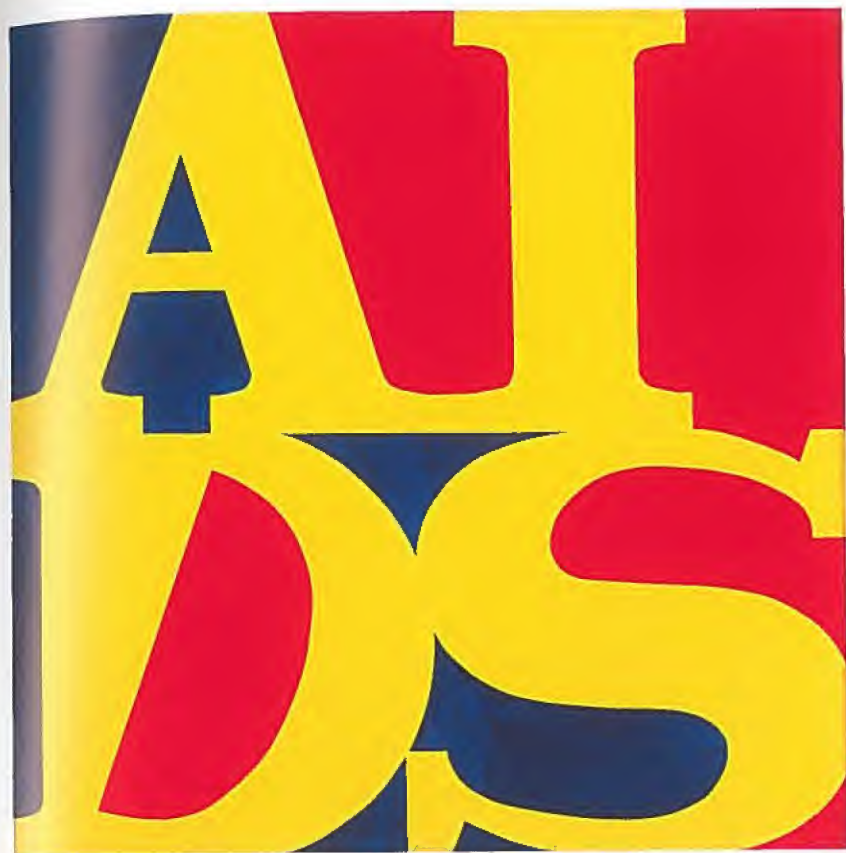


10. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Gold)*, 1987,  
acrylic and gold leaf  
on canvas, 76 × 76cm  
Private collection





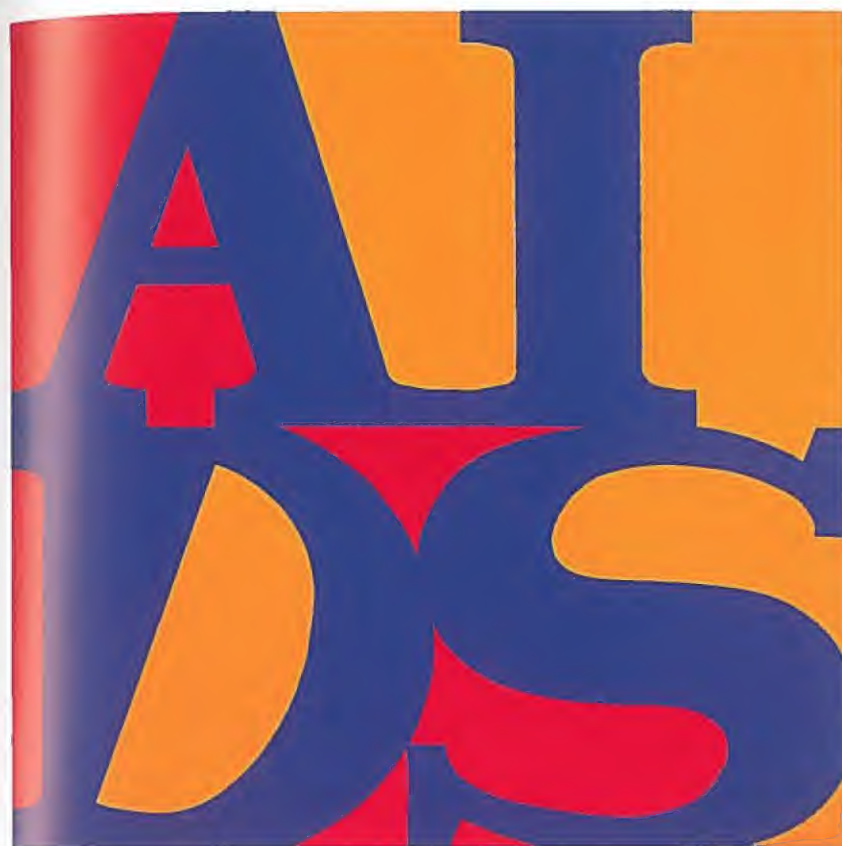
11. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Cadmium Orange Medium)*, 1988,  
 acrylic on canvas, 61 × 61cm  
 Private collection  
 Photograph: the artists



12. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Cadmium Yellow Medium)*, 1988,  
 acrylic on canvas, 61 × 61cm  
 Private collection  
 Photograph: the artists



13. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Cadmium Green Medium)*, 1988,  
 acrylic on canvas, 61 × 61cm  
 Private collection  
 Photograph: the artists

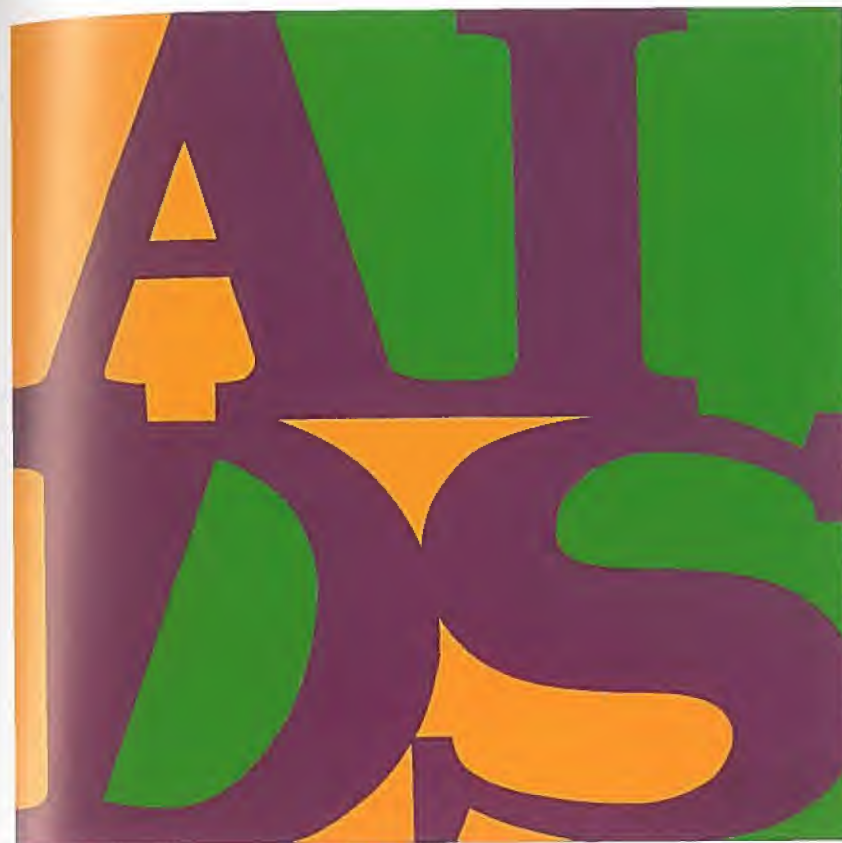


14. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Permanent Blue Light)*, 1988,  
 acrylic on canvas, 61 × 61cm  
 Private collection  
 Photograph: the artists





15. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Cadmium Red Medium)*, 1988,  
 acrylic on canvas, 61 × 61cm  
 Private collection  
 Photograph: the artists



16. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Permanent Violet Light)*, 1988,  
 acrylic on canvas, 61 × 61cm  
 Private collection  
 Photograph: the artists



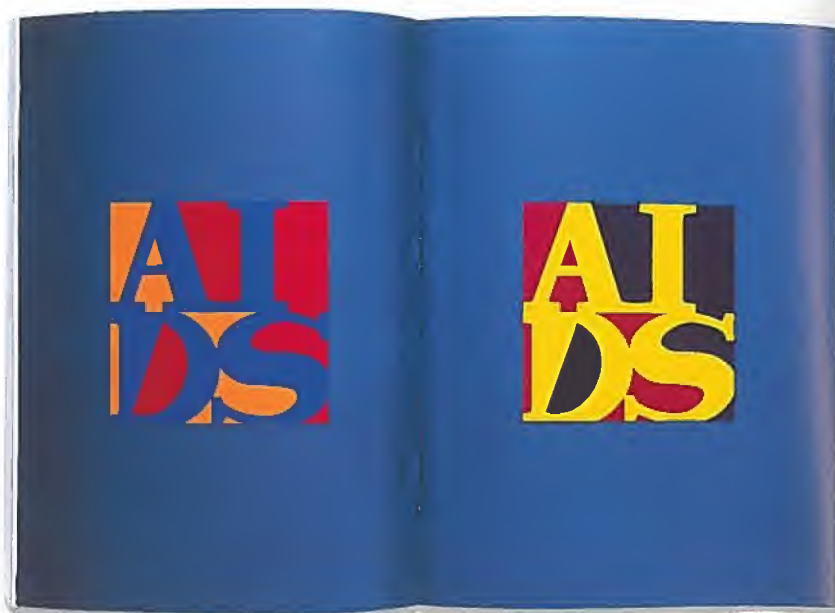
17. General Idea,  
*The Public and Private Domains of  
the Miss General Idea Pavilion*, 1988,  
site-specific installation with  
*AIDS* posters (1987, screenprint  
on paper, each 68.4 × 68.5cm) and  
prototype for *AIDS Wallpaper*  
Installation view (detail), Artspace,  
San Francisco, 1988  
Photograph: the artists



18. General Idea,  
*AIDS*, 1988,  
installation of three *AIDS*  
paintings on *AIDS* posters  
Installation view, Stampa Galerie  
at Frankfurt Art Fair, Frankfurt, 1989

From left to right:  
*AIDS* (Cadmium Orange Light), *AIDS*  
(Permanent Rose Deep) and *AIDS* (Lascaux  
Green Light), all 1988, acrylic on canvas,  
243.7 × 243.7cm; and *AIDS* posters, 1988,  
offset on paper, each 59.3 × 59.6cm  
Courtesy Stampa Galerie, Basel





19. General Idea,  
*General Idea: The AIDS Project*, 1989,  
 offset on paper, 12 pages,  
 colour reproductions,  
 27.5 × 20.5cm  
 Edition size unknown, of which  
 100 were kept as off-prints,  
 unsigned and unnumbered  
 Published by *C Magazine* and Gershon  
 Iskowitz Foundation, Toronto

Project produced as a special 12-colour  
 insert in *C Magazine* (no.22, June 1989,  
 unnumbered insert between pages 40  
 and 41). Also included in the catalogue  
*General Idea: The AIDS Project* (Toronto:  
 Gershon Iskowitz Foundation, 1989),  
 with an essay by Allan Schwartzman  
 Photograph: Peter MacCallum



20. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Lottery Ticket)*, 1989,  
 three parts, offset on paper,  
 each 10.6 × 16.2cm  
 Edition size unknown, unsigned  
 and unnumbered

Published by Arbeitsgemeinschaft  
 deutscher AIDS-Stiftungen, lottery ticket  
 for the 'Gewinnen und helfen' fundraising  
 campaign, one of many items using the  
*AIDS* logo designed for the German AIDS  
 Foundation



21. General Idea,  
*AIDS*, 1989,  
welded metal,  
30.5 × 30.5 × 15.2cm  
Prototype for an edition  
never completed  
Photograph: F. Rosenstiel



**IMAGEVIRUS.**



previous

22. General Idea,  
*Imagevirus (Posters)*, 1989,  
chromogenic print, 76 × 50.4cm  
Edition of 6 + 1 AP, signed and numbered  
Self-published

This work documents the first *AIDS* poster project, which was carried out on the streets of New York City in November 1987

following pages

23. General Idea,  
*Imagevirus (Times Square)*, 1989,  
chromogenic print, 76 × 50.4cm  
Edition of 6 + 1 AP, signed and numbered  
Self-published

This work documents a computer-generated *AIDS* animation broadcast from the Spectacolor Board at One Times Square, New York. The 30-second animation appeared every 20 minutes within a loop of commercial advertisements, from 1 to 30 September 1989 and again for 'A Day Without Art' on 1 December 1991. Commissioned as part of a series of such artworks for the 'Messages to the Public' programme of Public Art Fund Inc.

24. General Idea,  
*Imagevirus (New York Subway)*, 1991,  
chromogenic print, 76 × 50.4cm  
Edition of 6 + 1 AP, signed and numbered  
Self-published

This work documents the *AIDS* poster installed in every second subway car of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, New York, one at the front and one at the back, in a total of 4,500 cars, from 1 to 31 December 1989

25. General Idea,  
*Imagevirus (Hamburg)*, 1991,  
chromogenic print, 76 × 50.4cm  
Edition of 6 + 1 AP, signed and numbered

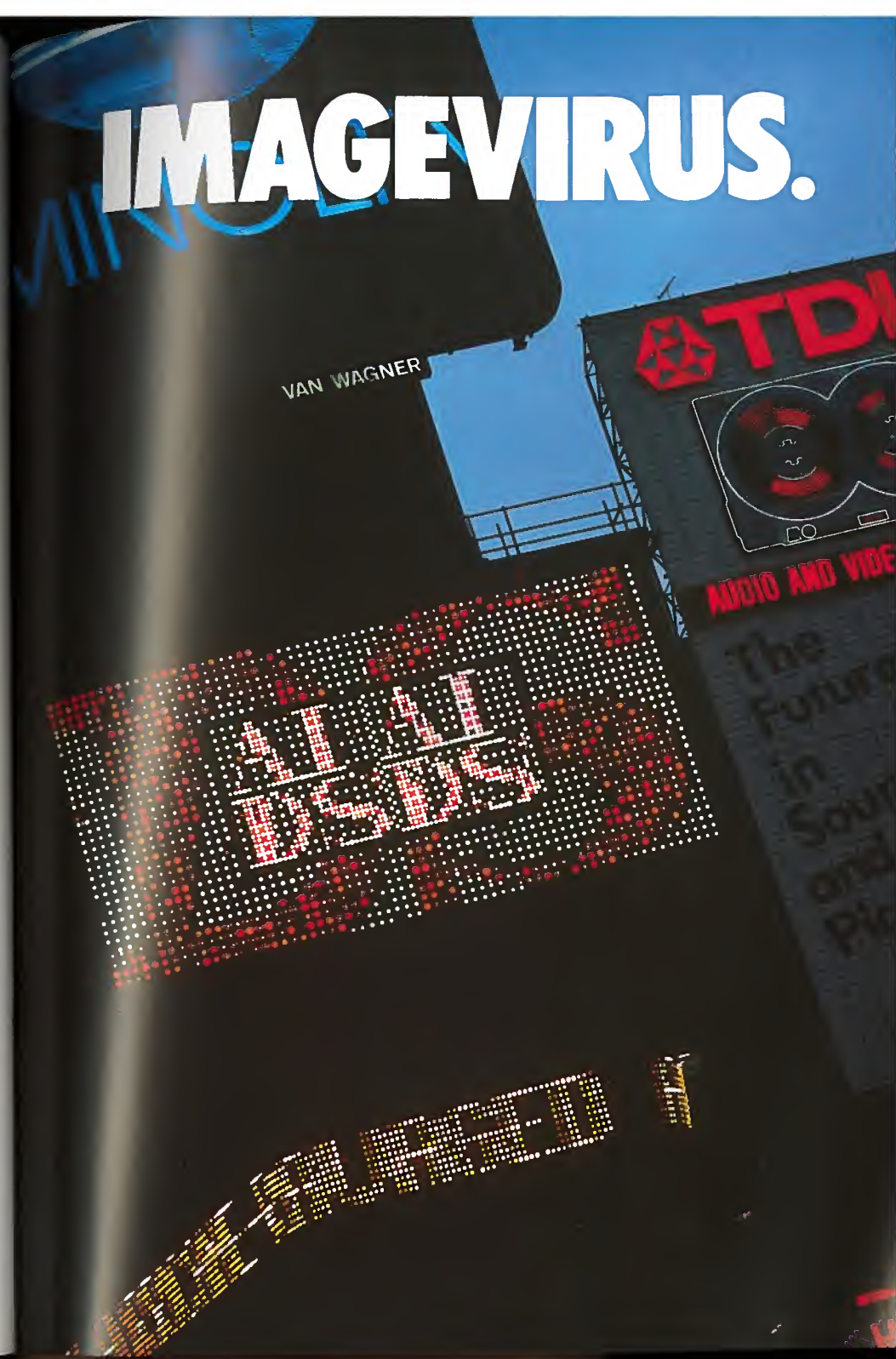
This work documents the *AIDS* sculpture that was commissioned as part of the exhibition 'D & S', organised by the Kunstverein in Hamburg in collaboration with the city of Hamburg. The sculpture was made of silver-lacquered metal (based on the finish of a silver Porsche) and remained in place on a major shopping street from October 1991 until February 1992

26. General Idea,  
*Imagevirus (Amsterdam)*, 1991,  
chromogenic print, 76 × 50.4cm  
Edition of 6 + 1 AP, signed and numbered  
Self-published

This work documents the *AIDS* poster project for the Amsterdam trams. Commissioned in 1990 as part of the conference 'Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy' at the Fodor Museum, the project utilised continuous silkscreened vinyl strips on seven trams which circulated through the centre of the city

All photographs: the artists

# IMAGEVIRUS.







**IMAGEVIRUS.**



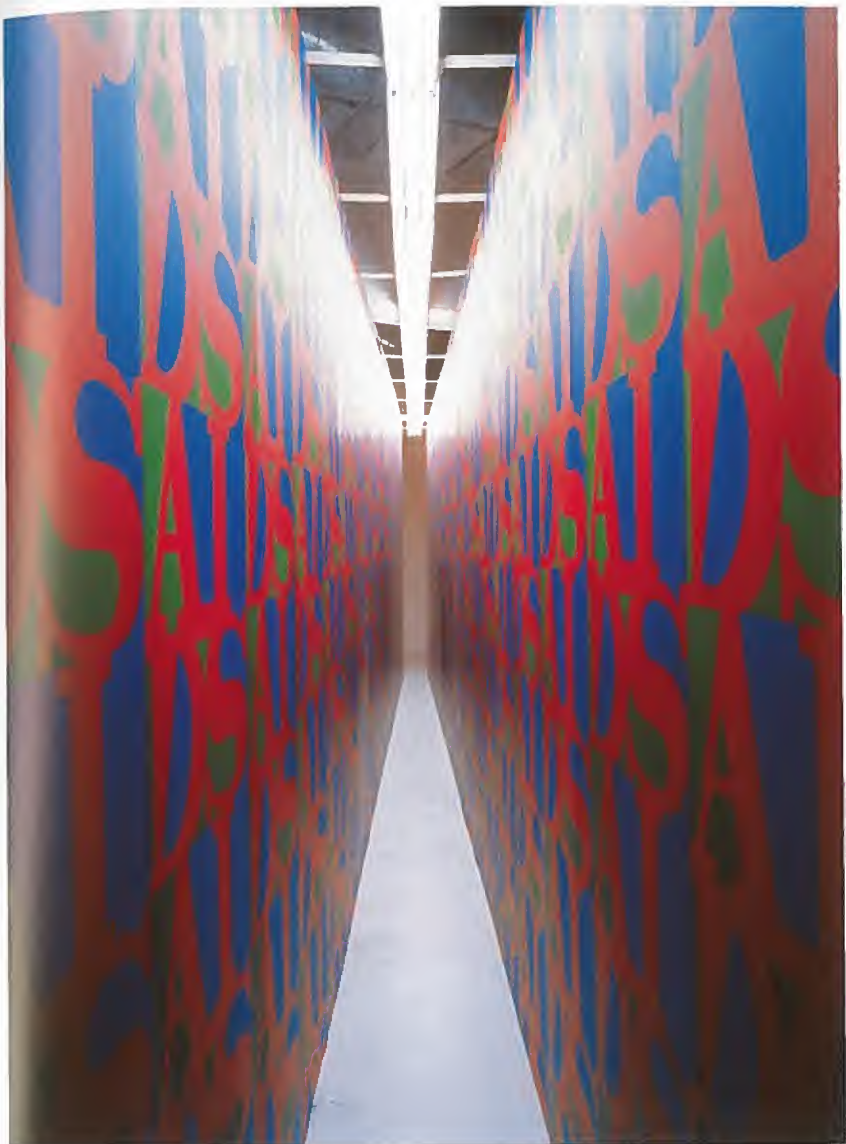
**IMAGEVIRUS.**





# IMAGEVIRUS.

27. General Idea  
*AIDS (Nauman)*, 1991,  
two free-standing walls, the inside  
walls covered with *AIDS Wallpaper*,  
each  $3.15 \times 13\text{m}$ , placed at 75cm at one end,  
converging at the distance of 25cm apart,  
three fluorescent tubes with fixture



Installation view, *AIDS de General Idea (Espai 13: Formes de la dissensió)*  
(a.k.a. *AIDS (Nauman)*), Fundació  
Joan Miró, Barcelona, 1991  
Photograph: the artists



28. General Idea,  
*Black AIDS #1*, 1991,  
 oil with beeswax glaze on  
 canvas, 152.4 × 152.4cm  
 Collection of Vancouver Art  
 Gallery, Vancouver

# JAMA<sup>®</sup>

The Journal of the American Medical Association

July 22/29, 1992



29. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Project for The Journal of the  
 American Medical Association)*, 1992,  
 offset on paper (cover for *The Journal of the  
 American Medical Association*, vol.268, no.4,

22–29 July 1992), 27.2 × 20.1cm  
 Edition size unknown, unsigned  
 and unnumbered  
 Published by the American Medical  
 Association, Chicago





30. General Idea,  
*AIDS*, 1988/90,  
installation of three *AIDS*  
paintings on *AIDS Wallpaper*  
Installation view,  
'General Idea's Fin de siècle',  
Württembergischer Kunstverein,  
Stuttgart, 1992

From left to right:  
*AIDS (Permanent Rose Deep)*,  
*AIDS (Lascaux Green Light)* and  
*AIDS (Cadmium Orange Light)*,  
all 1988, acrylic on canvas,  
243.7 × 243.7cm; and *AIDS Wallpaper*,  
1990, screenprint on wallpaper, each  
roll (unrolled) 457 × 68.6cm  
Collection of Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto  
Photograph: Reinhard Truckenmüller



31. General Idea,  
*AIDS Ring*, 1993/96,  
sterling silver ring in black  
velvet-covered jewellery box,  
title card (photocopy on  
vellum), in white card box,  
box: 7 × 6 × 4.5cm,  
ring: sizes 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12

Edition of 100 + 1 AP,  
signed and numbered  
Self-published  
Photograph: Peter MacCallum



32. General Idea  
*White AIDS #3*, 1993,  
 gesso on canvas, 152.4 × 152.4cm  
 Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago,  
 Chicago, purchase of the Society for  
 Contemporary Art  
 Photograph: Peter MacCallum



33. General Idea  
*AIDS*, 1993,  
 installation of three *White AIDS* paintings  
 on *BLAN©/BLAN©/BLAN©* wallpaper  
 Installation view at P.S.1 Contemporary  
 Art Center, Long Island City, 1994

From left to right:  
*White AIDS #1*, *White AIDS #4*,  
*White AIDS #6*, all 1993,  
 gesso on canvas, 152.4 × 152.4cm;  
 and *BLAN©/BLAN©/BLAN©* wallpaper,  
 1991, screenprint on wallpaper,  
 each roll (unrolled) 457 × 68.6cm



34. General Idea,  
*AIDS (Black)*, 1994,  
 oil with beeswax glaze on canvas,  
 six parts, each 61 × 61cm  
 Collection of Musée des beaux arts  
 de Montréal, Montreal  
 Photograph: the artists



35. General Idea,  
*AIDS*, 1994,  
 chenille on square-shaped  
 black or white felt (black  
 pictured), 17 × 17cm  
 Unlimited edition (40 produced),  
 unsigned and unnumbered  
 Self-published  
 Photograph: Peter MacCallum





36. General Idea,  
*AIDS*, 1989,  
 lacquered metal, 200 × 200 × 100cm  
 Installation view, 'Forms of Resistance:  
 Artists and the Desire for Social Change  
 from 1871 to the Present',  
 Van Abbemuseum,  
 Eindhoven, 2007–08  
 Courtesy Van Abbemuseum



37. General Idea,  
*AIDS (computer animation)*, 1993–94,  
 colour video without sound, 30min  
 Self-produced  
 Installation view at Kunstverein  
 München, Munich, 2006  
 Courtesy Kunstverein München





38. General Idea,  
*AIDS Wallpaper*, 1990,  
 screenprint on wallpaper,  
 each roll (unrolled) 457 × 68.6cm  
 Installation view at Kunsthalle Zürich  
 with works from series of *Infe©ted*

*Mondrian paintings and Infe©ted*  
 Rietveld, Zürich, 2006  
 Photograph: Stefan Altenberger  
 Courtesy Kunsthalle Zürich

it, imagined government laboratory experiments gone wrong. Or worse, they believed that AIDS was actually a form of bio-warfare designed by the US government to eliminate black people. These conspiracy theories spread through city streets by mouth-to-ear whispers. Raised eyebrows implied all sorts of things when the word AIDS was mentioned. I suppose conspiracy theories are viral in the way they travel. And these wild conjectures are all attempts to produce a whole picture from fragmentary evidence. In that way, they are part of the overall human effort to write history — they are versions of history. A virus, like all forms of nature, must enter into language for humans to recognise its existence. If there are no words to describe it, it does not exist. But words are also images, and both are constituent parts of a larger picture registered and held by sensory experience.

For General Idea format was the generative condition of art. A format is a system. If we applied the idea of format to, for example, painting, the painting format would include basic materials for manufacture, such as paint, brush and canvas, plus the labour of the artist to create and the dealer to sell and the viewer to look. There are also the gallery walls, the market, the public... The painting format would be an ensemble, a situation, a production. Not any particular painting, but painting in general.

Someone in the group had the idea to take the acronym AIDS and render it like the *LOVE* logo. Maybe it was Felix. Let's imagine he said it like a joke, a prank. He didn't really mean it. The group laughed. An uneasy laughter, embarrassment, the group was both amused and sickened by the idea. Between laughter and disgust a decision emerged, and General Idea embraced this simple, almost facile, idea. Once that happened, the idea was turned into a format — it was rendered subject to reproduction and dispersion. AIDS became an emblem,

was given a style, was fashioned to embody itself in a range of media. *Imagevirus* appeared everywhere: it became a campaign, a conspiracy.

Just as a deadly viral infection is never original to its host, an idea is never original to a mind. For General Idea identity was a form of virus, and in William Burroughs's universe identity is something like a kind of protoplasm that travels through all media — liquid, gaseous, solid. His protagonists become what they inject, ingest, fuck and see; content is transmitted and received through every encounter; and the characters in his books leave each other marked, altered irrevocably.

General Idea had been working with the idea that images are viruses for a very long time before the AIDS crisis. But during the crisis, the exigencies of AIDS activism created a demand for agitprop and direct action. The virus was no longer a metaphor, but a deadly reality that posed a tremendous challenge to the group. Remaining true to their own ongoing project, heavily informed by modernist literature, the Canadian Conceptualists were forced by circumstances to adapt their established methods to the new situation: they had to inhabit and subvert the viral forms of capitalist media in the present. To this end they explored the critical potential of homosexuality, using Burroughs as a model, to reveal the hypocrisy of dominant heterosexual norms. At that time, many queer artists, including myself, were claimed by the demands of activist politics. We were desperately fighting homophobia, and many of us felt like we had to abandon the conventions of modernism to better link our art directly to the protest movement against government inaction. For some, postmodernism demanded a direct engagement with the protest movement and/or health service organisations. But not for General Idea — they did something else. It was difficult to see at the time, but viewed

from a distance of over twenty years, we can grasp how the group continued to mine a particular vein of modernism. Simply put, they re-figured the styles and tactics of a homosexual avant-garde using the threat of viral infection as their model for identity politics.

### Activists and Agents

*So I am a public agent and don't know who I work for, get my instructions from street signs, newspapers and pieces of conversation I snap out of the air the way a vulture will tear the entrails from other mouths. In any case I can never catch up on my back cases and currently assigned to intercept blue movies of James Dean before the stuff gets to those queers supporting a James Dean habit which, so long as this agent picks his way through barber shops, subway toilets, grope movies and Turkish Baths, will never be legal and exempt narcotic.<sup>28</sup>*

The protagonist of a Burroughs novel doesn't know who he is, whom he works for, what he believes or what he knows. He lives to take orders. In other words, he is the modern subject — an insect-like creature who responds to signals emerging out of the hive mind. There is little to no individual identity in him, and his behaviour is a matter of conformity. Social position is established by context in any given situation. But, despite the fact that context and social position can partly determine one's course of action, chance plays the largest role. Reversals of fortune are common, and there is constant danger. Life is cheap. Mutations are normal. Characters often transform into different creatures right before your eyes — in fact, the same character could take many varying forms without even knowing it. Under these conditions of extreme mutability, the protagonist/agent lives in a paranoid state. You never know whose side you are on

in a world dominated by corporations at war. The planet exists under an ever-present threat of annihilation.

Burroughs's novels describe the culture of 1950s North America: anxiety about nuclear holocaust, Cold War paranoia and the rise of corporate capitalism. Perhaps the most insidious development of that time was the growth of electronic technology, with the invasion of the home by television. After that, there was nowhere to hide from infectious crass commercialism. Pop art was a response to these conditions, and the influence of Andy Warhol became inescapable for artists emerging in the 1960s. Regarding the influence of Pop on General Idea, it is interesting to recall how Peter Wollen distinguished Burroughs's strategies from Warhol's:

*Burroughs's paranoid fear of being taken over by alien words and images is the exact converse of Warhol's 'reverse paranoid' desire to be taken over. Both recorded compulsively in order to sabotage (Burroughs) and facilitate (Warhol) the workings of the semiotic machine.<sup>29</sup>*

The distinction Wollen draws between Warhol and Burroughs relates to two different paranoid positions. Burroughs is fending off infection from the constant stream of information in the advertising age, while Warhol is afraid of loss — he is afraid he will miss something because he can't take in enough. Both artists critically challenged the modes of production of mid-twentieth-century America. And I agree with Wollen that they operated from different positions, but I believe that ambivalence was a shared underlying principle for both.

Certainly, Burroughs was a saboteur. His work was subversive, and he understood consumerism as a kind of addiction: his 'algebra of need' placed products and ideas on the same level

as junk and sex. However, there is a kind of 'facilitation', like the kind that Wollen identifies with Warhol, also at work in Burroughs. As a self-avowed homosexual junkie, he recruited. His books drew members. *Naked Lunch* opened up new territory in the dystopian post-War 1950s, making room for sexual revolution and drug culture. Burroughs's world was homosexual, polymorphously perverse, hallucinatory and amoral. Auto-asphyxiation and oral and anal sex were the principle preoccupations of his male-gendered agents. When they weren't fucking, they were injecting or ingesting some substance to profoundly alter the shape and context of their present world. To what end? Who could tell? Burroughs's junkie wasn't a revolutionary, he was a public agent, a man for hire. What else would he be? The corporate organisation of the universe was a given fact of the environment. Extreme sensations were the only life-affirming pursuits in an otherwise dull, senseless, soulless existence. So Burroughs violently rejected conformity, but I am not sure how to read his protest. Like all forms of revolt there is profound despair hybridised with explosive joy. It is complicated.

In an essay titled 'Myth As Parasite/Image as Virus, General Idea's Bookshelf from 1967—1975' (1997), AA Bronson attested to the significant role that reading books played during the group's early formation. Bronson quotes Stein, Burroughs, Roland Barthes, Marshall McLuhan, Robert Jay Lifton, Alice A. Bailey, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Brion Gysin among others. Here is his opening paragraph:

*In this brief essay I want to give clues, a few notes towards where to look and how to see when thinking about General Idea, about our early years when we first came together, when we were all reading, when we were all thinking, when we were all looking, when we were all talking: every day we came together to think and to look and talk and*

*gradually we became a single organism with a single way of seeing. This is the way it was.*<sup>30</sup>

A beautiful story, and it is not yet over — the story of the twentieth-century bohemian avant-garde. I never tire of this story, I love telling it. So picture it again — AA, Jorge and Felix at their table, could be in Toronto, right before they move to New York. They are drinking coffee, the sun is pouring through the window. Someone, maybe Felix, has an idea. He says, 'Hey! Let's take the acronym A-I-D-S and make a logo to resemble Robert Indiana's famous *LOVE* logo.' They all laugh. Then there is silence. The idea is a little sickening.

How could they turn love into AIDS? That is exactly the narrative concocted by the right-wing homophobes to explain AIDS. Jerry Falwell, a televangelist and leader of the Moral Majority, a powerful right-wing Christian organisation with considerable influence during Ronald Reagan's presidency, publicly proclaimed in the 1980s that 'AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals'.<sup>31</sup> During the 1980s, homosexual men accounted for the majority of AIDS cases in the United States. Many of us, gays and lesbians, felt threatened by extreme homophobia when our friends were getting sick and dying from a mysterious disease, little understood, with no treatment or cure.

Compared to the 1980s, the previous decade seemed a tolerant time in the country. In the 1970s, the Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement had great success in raising consciousness about the diversity of human sexuality. Civil rights battles were fought and some strides were made toward establishing legal protections in the workplace and throughout society. By the thousands, people were coming out as gay. In major cities like

San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, enclaves of gay culture welcomed queers from all over the country to escape less hospitable, even dangerous places of origin. I caught the tail end of that decade, so I remember sex before AIDS. My teenage years were animated by the ethos of sexual liberation. I came out as a bisexual in high school, and in 1983, when I moved to New York City from Long Island — a mere two-hour train ride, but galaxies away — Manhattan held out many opportunities for new experiences. The St. Mark's Baths were still open, and men still cruised the piers on the outer edges of the city. I was awestruck and intimidated by all this, and utterly fascinated. I dipped my toe into the water.

That shimmering surface, and my reflection in it, was quickly disturbed by the tidal currents of the coming catastrophe. AIDS changed everything. Public sex culture suffered many attacks from both inside and outside the gay community, and newspapers debated the pros and cons of quarantine for gay people. There were precedents for quarantine in the United States: thousands of Japanese Americans were put into concentration camps during World War II, and during syphilis outbreaks in the early part of the century prostitutes were routinely rounded up.<sup>32</sup> Rather than responding to AIDS as a health crisis, the US government, with the support of a huge portion of its citizenry, seemed to be gearing up for a witch hunt, a massive purge of some kind. In New York and elsewhere, the gay community felt the need to protect itself. Non-profit organisations were established to care for the sick and dying, and protests groups were formed to militantly advocate for the protection and treatment of people with AIDS.

### **Content and Context**

When I first asked AA Bronson about the genesis of *Imagevirus*, he couldn't remember who had the idea. He said that Felix, Jorge and he were having a casual conversation over breakfast, as they



did every day. AA explained that General Idea had one mind, and that ideas bubbled up out of their intense brainstorming sessions. When I sat down with AA a few weeks later, I recorded the conversation, repeating my question about the origin of *Imagevirus*. AA gave a slightly amended version:

*...the idea came before we even moved to New York, because I remember sitting around the table in Toronto and it came full-fledged out of Felix's mouth, which is kind of the way ideas always came, right? Boom, there they are. And then we're all like 'Oh, God! That's in such bad taste. Oh, we could never do that.' We knew we were going to have to do it sometime, because whenever we thought something was so horrendous we usually ended up doing that. It meant there was something about it, you know ... It had this big hook and you had to ask, 'What's that hook about it? What is that? What is it that gives it that quality?' It's not just that it's bad taste. It's something far beyond that...'<sup>33</sup>*

First, it is significant and totally understandable that AA would give varying accounts of the development of General Idea's ideas. He is the only surviving member of a three-person group whose beginnings emerged out of cooperative actions among a shifting number of participants, although by the early 1970s it was solidly a three-man outfit. Felix was diagnosed with AIDS in 1989, and Jorge in 1990, but in my conversation with AA he had difficulty recalling exactly when their respective diagnoses occurred. And why wouldn't he? We are talking about complicated overlapping dates, facts and emotions. The burden on AA to be the repository and archivist of his group's collective history must be enormous.

I identify with AA's role as a survivor because all of us who passed through the early period of the AIDS epidemic lost some

of the people closest to us — lovers, friends — and watched many others — acquaintances, familiar faces — disappear from view. This was not a topic we took up in the interview, and I haven't really discussed it with him in the many subsequent conversations we have had. However, in 2001 AA produced a work called *Negative Thoughts*, which exists on the web and as a book. In it, AA faces the challenges of being a survivor:

## PART 2: HIV-NEGATIVE

*I am the negative man.*

*In 1994, when Jorge and Felix were dying, I convinced myself that I was dying too, that the HIV was latent, that I had symptoms of illness, that my grief together with my desire to die would rot me through with cancer. I thought through my life as they thought through theirs, and we wrote our wills together. I came to a point of completion, a sense of satisfaction. I was able to say, and did: 'If I die tomorrow, I will have lived a full life.' I was ready to let go.*

*But life did not let go of me. It forced me to suffer.*

*Jorge died, and then through the fog of grief, five months later, Felix died too. I was sitting with him. I said to him, 'Felix, it's OK, if you want to go now you can.' He looked at me uncomprehendingly and fell into a small sleep. I went to refill my coffee cup and when I returned he was gone.*

*What is there to say of death? We live and then we die. While we live, we are surrounded by the dying, and by the dead. We are all dying.*

*And the dead walk among us, surveying our decay.*<sup>34</sup>

In *Negative Thoughts*, AA seems to come to a graceful resolve and quiet understanding of mortality. In the end, he embraces the mutability of life and expresses enthusiasm about living. So, with regard to the variances in historical accounts, there is another piece of the puzzle to consider here. General Idea is a self-created fiction — its members fabricated their identities and pasts. AA Bronson's 'real' name is Michael Tims. Felix Partz (aka Felicks Partz and Private Partz) was actually born Ronald Gabe. Jorge Zontal was Slobodan Saia-Levy. Even the date of their beginning as a group in 1968 was inaccurately established and repeated by them.<sup>35</sup> This self-fashioning, self-naming, self-determining *modus operandi* was fundamental to the anti-establishment art of General Idea, which emerged out of a revolutionary culture determined to overthrow official histories as lies perpetrated by the ruling class, the patriarchy and heterosexual culture.

I have made the argument that General Idea follows a modernist trajectory, but that is my argument, not theirs. History is a problem. At its best, it is a well-told story that accords with the senses of those who write it and of those who read it. Our sense of the truth is just that, a sense. Well, that is what I believe. Stop. Before I lapse into moral relativism and get accused of all kinds of crimes against scholarship, let us agree to this. The story being told here is largely about *Imagevirus*, and so it must include some account of General Idea's history previous to that work. More than that, it demands some grasp of the history of the bohemian avant-garde in the twentieth century, because that is also the story of General Idea. Then there is even more: I am also obliged to tell, in part, the history of AIDS and AIDS activism, and once I start talking about AIDS, I can't leave myself out of the picture.

As a bisexual, gay-identified, New York Jewish intellectual with AIDS, I would like to come out right now and say that I am completely in sympathy with General Idea's history and their overall project. This was not always the case. In fact when I first saw the *AIDS* logo in 1987, I strongly objected to General Idea's *Imagevirus* campaign. I was a young and very militant AIDS activist, actively involved in the direct-action protest group ACT UP. To me and a lot of other activist artists who devoted their energy to fighting government inaction on AIDS, *Imagevirus* lacked imagination. The AIDS activist ethos was best summed up by a poster designed in 1988 by the collective Gran Fury, which was part of ACT UP.<sup>36</sup> The poster declared 'Art is Not Enough; Collective Direct Action to End AIDS!' (fig.40) Furious about *Imagevirus*, Gran Fury made a painting using the letters R-I-O-T (*RIOT*, 1988), as a riposte to the *AIDS* logo (fig.41). AIDS lead to *RIOT* because the disease was politicised as a culture war in which our lives were at stake. AIDS was not the result of perverse LOVE! We felt rage.

I was involved with a group called DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists), which functioned as the documentary arm of ACT UP. We taped the protests and made low-budget videos to publicise our efforts, to tell our own story about AIDS. I was also part of a smaller affinity group called MHA (Metropolitan Health Association), which plastered the New York City subway system with explicit posters showing the correct way to put on a condom and the right way to sanitise hypodermic needles (or 'works'). The two principal ways of getting AIDS were sex without condoms and sharing needles, but the government had banned any public funding for AIDS education that 'condoned' homosexuality,<sup>37</sup> and in New York, clean needles were only legally available by medical prescription.<sup>38</sup> In the face of this, all our poster campaigns, videos and activist art evolved out of our commitment to direct political action.

General Idea wasn't really part of the activist scene, although their lives were very much affected by AIDS. When Felix, or whoever, had the idea for *Imagevirus*, the group was preoccupied with taking care of their sick friend Robert. Actually, they had many sick friends then, and they themselves were at risk. General Idea always played its cards close to the chest. I think many critics of General Idea assumed that the artists were relatively untouched by the epidemic, as the *Imagevirus* project seemed so cool and aloof, distant from militant activism. According to AA, they decided to stay away from demonstrations because they couldn't risk being arrested: they were not US citizens and therefore were vulnerable to deportation.<sup>39</sup>

I don't want to sound like I am making excuses for the members of General Idea — they don't need to be defended. I am reliving my own past here. That period, from 1986 to 1995, when there was no effective treatment for AIDS, was very traumatic. I have travelled a long way since 1987. I am 46 now, still alive, and I can't possibly be expected to have the same politics I had in my twenties. This seems obvious, but actually writing this, writing these very sentences, is a way to defend myself from my own overwhelming sense of responsibility, my feelings of guilt. I will always feel responsible to the dead left behind over the years. It is difficult for survivors like me and AA, with AIDS or HIV-negative, to lay down past positions and passions. Memories. Almost everyone I know who passed through that period has changed, matured, come to a more complete understanding of the past. And yet, we have to apologise to the dead. I feel that way. I am sorry. I know that none of my friends now long gone would wish anything for me but a healthy long life. And yet, I feel guilty. I lost my best friend Ray when we were both 27 years old, in 1991. Why he died and why I didn't is a senseless question that will always torment me.

The pathology of the HIV virus is still largely a mystery and it moves through each body it infects differently. Today we have powerful drugs that are keeping me and many others alive. There is still no cure for AIDS, but the biggest political issue regarding HIV infection now is getting drugs into the hands of the millions around the world who can't afford them. However, for the years that General Idea made *Imagevirus* in all its permutations, the HIV virus spread unchecked through populations around the planet.

General Idea moved to New York City just as AIDS activism was emerging. The transition to New York in 1986 was difficult. Soon after they arrived they realised that the elaborate history of their work, the complicated procedures that they employed, their reliance on narrative to support their artwork's various readings... all these key characteristics of their art were lost on a New York audience with little patience for history lessons. 'You'd start to tell somebody and their eyes would glaze over,' AA recalled.<sup>40</sup>

The first *Imagevirus* logo was produced in 1987 as a six by six feet painting for a group show to benefit amfAR (The Foundation for AIDS Research), but the *AIDS* painting did not sell in that show. Soon after General Idea decided the single painting of the *Imagevirus* logo was not satisfying, that it didn't work for them as an individual painting in the context of a gallery, neither alone nor hanging next to other works like Robert Indiana's *LOVE* logo — it required repetition. The next stage of *Imagevirus* consisted of two series of paintings exhibited in New York that same year (six of them measuring eight by eight feet, and twelve measuring two by two), and a poster project that developed simultaneously in New York and then in 1988 in San Francisco, through which huge sections of the two cities' streets were covered with the repeated image of the *AIDS* logo. 'It became

mediafied because that is what we did best, work with media.’<sup>41</sup> In 1989, the *AIDS* logo was shown on the Spectacolor Board in Times Square. The board was a sign composed of hundreds of light bulbs used for advertising, but it was often used by artists for public projects.<sup>42</sup> Then came the *Imagevirus* posters distributed throughout the New York City subway; *AIDS* logos appeared on the outside surfaces of trams in Amsterdam and Seattle; and a large video projection loomed in the main square of Rotterdam, showing an animation using the same imagery as the Spectacolor Board. This animation was also exhibited in subsequent exhibitions. Seventy or eighty different sorts of public interventions using the logo followed over the next few years.

General Idea believed that museums were like the showroom in which you first exhibit a car, and the streets as the place where you drive it — both seemed necessary to them, but the latter was perhaps more interesting, even essential. So they began in 1988 to make *AIDS* logo wallpaper to cover walls in museums and art fairs, and to stage spectacular exhibitions of *AIDS* paintings on top of that. The paintings were made in varying colour combinations and sizes. A big metal public sculpture of the logo was made for the city of Hamburg in 1991. General Idea gave explicit instructions to the city to allow people to add their own graffiti and signage to the sculpture, which they did. As the sculpture travelled to the US, the collection of anonymous public commentary was supposed to travel on it, but every venue that subsequently exhibited the sculpture polished it clean, disregarding the artists’ instructions.

General Idea documented all their *Imagevirus* interventions. One of the iterations of the project was a series of images made in 1989 and 1991, formulated to replicate the design of Absolut vodka advertisements, which were ubiquitous in the late 1980s

and early 90s. These photographic images of the *AIDS* logo wheatpasted in different urban locations and resembling the format of a magazine advertisement were supposed to enter into the world as pages in actual magazines. Though General Idea thought that all the art magazines would accept them, their galleries could not afford full-page colour advertisements. As a result, only one magazine agreed, *Canadian Art*, and General Idea produced only five images in this series before that idea ran out of steam.<sup>43</sup> They made the final version of the *AIDS* logo as a chenille crest in 1994.

Again, at the time I didn’t appreciate *Imagevirus*. I wasn’t even aware of the scope and scale of the project. Now, from the vantage of time, I can appreciate General Idea’s work was no less political than the AIDS activists’ work of the 1980s. This realisation prompts a re-calibration — a re-framing of the group’s efforts within the complex and contradictory history of avant-garde aspirations throughout the twentieth century. I believe that General Idea, like Burroughs, sought an alternative to capitalist culture, which they hated for its conformity, while at the same time enjoying the latent perverse possibilities of the market. Their politics, like Burroughs’s, consisted in establishing an entirely novel way of feeling about the present. Key to understanding their radicalism is their 1985 video *Shut the Fuck Up* (1984; fig.42). Made before *Imagevirus*, this corrosive and angry work establishes the affective ground against which to read the series. The video adopts the format of a television show — part documentary, part news programme, part commercial. Each member of General Idea takes a turn addressing the camera.

Jorge: *We don’t want to destroy television — we want to add to it — we want to stretch it until it starts to lose shape.*



Felix: *We're supposed to be romantic, untamed, while our artworks are slid back into the market place, blue chip investments for level-headed fetishists.*

AA: *More and more artists are turning to popular media in an effort to examine the effectiveness of their work, not only in an attempt to reach a larger audience but also to obtain access to the immediacy of newspapers, magazines, rock 'n' roll and, of course, television itself.*

*Shut the Fuck Up* employs two appropriated clips as foils to stage a protest against bad faith and vulgar commercialism in the art world. The first clip is from the campy 1960s television show *Batman*, in which the evil Joker wins a painting contest for an abstract composition — a blank canvas — titled *Death of a Mauve Bat*. The second is taken from documentation of Yves Klein working on one of his *Anthropométries* (1960–61), pressing his human paint brushes — nude female models covered in blue paint — onto a hanging canvas. Before this, AA and Felix banter, critiquing the contemporary art world. At one point, AA is shown quoting directly from *The New York Times*. They refer to Julian Schnabel as an example of 'art world beef', implying that the art world is a meat market with indiscriminate taste. Their back-and-forth is funny, almost bitchy. There are also images of poodles throughout the video, General Idea's 'signature image' at the time, and you can hear the yipping of poodles intermittently on the soundtrack. AA and Felix alternately describe the performance General Idea executed in Geneva in 1984, *XXX blue*, for which the three artists dipped three stuffed poodles into vats of International Klein Blue paint and used the paint-soaked poodles to paint three X shapes across three giant canvases. 'XXX for poison. XXX for kisses. XXX for epitaph,' Felix explains.

Watching *Shut the Fuck Up* repeatedly on YouTube, I am most affected by two monologues angrily delivered directly to the camera by Jorge Zontal.<sup>44</sup> The camera is focused tightly on his face, shot against a background of the colour bars commonly used as the test pattern for video. Each sentence of Jorge's screed is a fragment. I am struggling with how to describe Jorge's dramatic performance, but it could most accurately be characterised as a soliloquy, composed as a cut-up montage:

*I'm sick of being eaten up and spit out.  
They use you, abuse you, contort you, distort you and don't  
even respect you in the morning papers.  
I'm not gonna be a media whore...  
Newspapers ... I wouldn't even wipe my ass with you.  
Blblblblblblblblblblblblblblblbl  
I'm not gonna be gobbled up by their fucking cancerous  
context.  
I'm not gonna crawl on all four and paint with my feet.  
I don't wanna be a figure in their landscape.  
I'd like to paint them into a corner.  
Ya, tell me about it, nothing new, same old thing,  
irrelevant art.  
Kick me, kick me.  
Blblblblblblblblblblblblblblblbl  
I don't wanna play bad guy to their good guy, boho to their  
fucking bourgeoisie.  
I'm not gonna shit on a canvas so they can call it art and  
frame it.  
Start, start, start.  
I bend over backwards for them and they fuck me up the  
ass.  
Whoops, I guess I'm really gonna get it.  
I'm scared, I'm really scared.*

It is difficult to determine Jorge's actual sentiments. The text is spat out with utter disgust, dripping with irony. The three last lines seem to be Jorge's real message:

*Stop the fucking presses.  
Change the fucking channel.  
SHUT THE FUCK UP SHUT THE FUCK UP.*

The second monologue Jorge performs in the video is a cut-up montage like the first, but the camera is less tightly focused on him, and you can see his shoulders. His delivery is a bit more subdued than in the first, but no less angry, and he has dropped the irony. He now directly addresses the viewer, burdening the spectator with the demand for understanding. He is beseeching. He implores us to comprehend the meaning of a video work that does not satisfactorily deliver a coherent message, even though all three artists appear to openly declare their intentions:

*Who can put the pieces together again?  
You can put the pieces together again.*

*When you get the joke, you break up.  
You break up.*

*Everything turns upside down, inside out.  
Upside down, inside out.*

*One set of relationships turns into another.*

*The new emergent meaning and the old retiring meaning,  
engaged in a battle of wits — a battle of wits.  
On the border between content and context, between content  
and context.*

*The pieces of the puzzle don't add up.  
They just don't add up.*

*Are you listening?  
Are you listening?*

*Do you get the picture?  
Do you get the picture?*

*Do you know what to say?  
Do you know what to say?  
When there's nothing to say.*

*When there's nothing to say  
SHUT THE FUCK UP SHUT THE FUCK UP.*

This video broke open the mystery of *Imagevirus* to me, it gave me the coordinates to understand it. In 1987, I couldn't put the pieces together. I was aware of General Idea's work, we looked at it in art school. I was intrigued by the perversity of a piece like *Nazi Milk* (1979), an image of blonde boy drinking a glass of milk that leaves behind a white Hitler moustache. It was funny, but it seemed flippant. At the time a fuller appreciation of their work eluded me. I was like the other New Yorkers that AA described — uninformed and disinterested in their history.

The members of General Idea were twenty years older than me in the 1980s, already established as artists with a very large body of work. Their politics were formed by the protests of the 1960s, and by the disillusionment following that intense period of upheaval. In Bronson's essay 'Myth As Parasite/Image As Virus, General Idea's Bookshelf 1967—1975', he explains the group's politics:

*We considered ourselves a cultural parasite and our method was viral. These mixed metaphors work if you stop to think about them. We had abandoned our hippie backgrounds of heterosexual idealism, abandoned any shred of belief that we could change the world by activism, by demonstration, by any of the methods we had tried in the 1960s — they had failed. As children of the Summer of Love (1967) and spectators of the Paris riots (1968), we were well aware of the International Situationists and Society of the Spectacle on one hand, and of Marshall McLuhan, drug culture, digger houses, underground papers and free schools on the other.*

*Now we turned to the queer outsider methods of William Burroughs, for example, whose invented universe of sex-mad body-snatcher espionage archetypes provided the ironic myth-making model we required: “We need a peg to hang it on,” he said. “Something really ugly like a virus. Not for nothing do they come from a land without mirrors.” So he takes over this magazine ... And he breaks out all the ugliest pictures in the image bank and puts it out on the subliminal so one crisis piles up after the other right on schedule.’<sup>45</sup>*

So, the virus comes from a land without mirrors! That is a place without self-reflection. The influence of Burroughs becomes clearer — the aim of art is to get beyond the kind of morality enforced by social conformity, to act with impunity. To become what you are. That sounds irresponsible, but in the context of the struggle against homosexual oppression, it sounds like liberation.

### East and West

In *Nova Express*, Burroughs occasionally references T.S. Eliot’s enormously influential poem ‘The Waste Land’ (1922). For

example, he slyly alters Eliot’s line, ‘Who is the third who walks always beside you?’, writing ‘Empty is the third who walks beside you’.<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere he snatches a direct quote from the poem, ‘*Wo weilest du?*’ (‘Where linger you?’), which erupts out of the text as a *non sequitur*.<sup>47</sup> ‘The Waste Land’ is itself influential for its collage form and erudite citations. It is also a famous example of the importation of Eastern philosophy into Western writing. I am thinking of the way the poem ends on the words ‘Shantih shantih shantih’,<sup>48</sup> or its direct reference to the Buddhist Sutra ‘The Fire Sermon’, which is the title of part three of ‘The Waste Land’. Eliot’s line 308 ‘Burning burning burning burning’ echoes the translation of ‘The Fire Sermon’ he used, footnoted by Eliot as:

*The complete text of the Buddha’s ‘Fire Sermon’ (which corresponds in importance to the ‘Sermon on the Mount’) from which these words are taken, will be found translated in the late Henry Clarke Warren’s Buddhism in Translation (Harvard Oriental Series). Mr. Warren was one of the great pioneers of Buddhist studies in the Occident.’<sup>49</sup>*

In the sermon, the Buddha instructs his priests that all things

*are on fire ... The eye ... is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that also is on fire. And with what are these on fire? With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation.’<sup>50</sup>*

‘The Fire Sermon’ came to my attention coincidentally during my research for this book. I was reading Burroughs’s novel

*The Soft Machine*. The repetitive nature of its prose, and its preoccupation with bodily torture, not only depicted but also embodied in his cut up method, led me to the idea that Burroughs's texts shared a sympathy with 'The Fire Sermon'. *The Soft Machine* is built upon a sequence of one description after another of a hanging man's involuntary erection and orgasm: the action of the novel consistently comes to rest on the image of a man, strung up by the neck, pants down, cock hard. *The Soft Machine* rehearses this imagery ad infinitum. The action comes to an abrupt orgasmic conclusion only to start again from zero. 'The Fire Sermon' has no such imagery, but the text repetitiously works through every aspect of sensual existence, resolving all the movements of the universe into one immense conflagration. Comparing the two, I could at the very least establish that they have some superficial similarities: the structure of repetition, the insistence on a particular sensation or image and the imaginative creation of a hellish setting for revelation.

Then I watched *Shut the Fuck Up*. It vexed me and annoyed me. I fell in love with it. It is mean and corrosive. It is nasty and clarifying! It has the cleansing properties of fire. It is a self-immolation. Jorge's monologue is a self-negation. He is like the Buddha in 'The Fire Sermon' — all is burning.

I took these thoughts to AA, who was very excited by my connections. As it turns out, since 1977 both he and Jorge were deeply involved with meditation. In 1983, one year before General Idea completed *Shut the Fuck Up*, Jorge and AA met the Dalai Lama and were initiated into a tantric practice, the Yamantaka, that involved an elaborate visualisation. The Yamantaka is one of the wrathful deities, said to be especially appropriate to artists and to overcoming obstacles. And throughout the period they were working on *Imagevirus*, Jorge was making an ongoing series of drawings of faces

composed of male and female body parts — penises, breasts and buttocks arranged around an open mouth revealing a tongue of flames (fig.43).

In *Shut the Fuck Up*, the group tried by way of caustic irony and self-negation to achieve a state without reflection, a state of purity. I think General Idea was aiming, like many other modern artists, to achieve autonomy from the corrupting forces of corporate capitalism, trying to escape the soul-killing conformity demanded by the marketplace. The group's efforts were shaped by methods derived from literature and writing, means they imported into the various formats they chose to inhabit. Recall here that a format is not merely an issue of design, but rather the entire apparatus of a particular medium considering every aspect of its manufacture and use. Think of television, for example, and remember what Jorge said at the very beginning of *Shut the Fuck Up*: 'We don't want to destroy television — we want to add to it — we want to stretch it until it starts to lose shape.'

The goal behind all of General Idea's work was *a-tending-away-from-the-familiar* into *something-that-simply-and-self-evidently-is-itself*. Being not knowing. In *Shut the Fuck Up* the directive was clear: don't ask why, show how. The solution to the problem of being an artist in the late twentieth century, according to General Idea, was a kind of enlightenment, a revelation by which both artist and viewer were given to understand that:

*One set of relationships turns into another.  
The new emergent meaning and the old retiring meaning,  
engaged in a battle of wits — a battle of wits.  
On the border between content and context, between  
content and context.*



Jorge said it all in his soliloquy: General Idea placed its faith in self-awareness and made a devout commitment to constant mutability. The operative notion of the self in their work was demonstrably non-essentialist, as they didn't seem to recognise or perform any version of the self that rested on the guarantee of some essential substance.

The underlying philosophical underpinnings of General Idea's work by the mid-1980s seems clear: everything is an illusion, even self-reflection. The artist develops the skills to become aware of his context, to truly see how context shifts from occasion to occasion, to recognise how definition is a process and not a state. Once you see the world as constant motion, the content of any given moment becomes ephemeral, gone before it can even be grasped. At the centre of this cosmology there exists an animating impulse that is formless and objectless. It is the uncreated, the unspeakable. Shut the fuck up.

You can see this in Burroughs too. His public agents are enslaved by corporate society. As junkies and homosexuals, they hunt or they are hunted in a 'kill or be killed' world, at war with an enemy they cannot see. They constantly shift shape, travel through time, undo and redo themselves as they are working through the accrued karma of countless lives, each avatar carrying with it a burden — the 'algebra of need', Burroughs's term for desire.

Desire can't know itself. Desire simply is. Numerous testimonies to this point of view are given in mystical writings, in literature and art, in psychology, psychoanalytic theory, in philosophy. From the anonymously written book of Christian mysticism titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*, to Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.<sup>51</sup> It is a cliché, a chestnut, a joke — desire desires its own end, which

can never be reached because desire ultimately has no particular object as its end. Desire is a vicious circle, an impasse. The experience of desire and the attempt to explain it are both futile endeavours. Desire can be shown, its functioning described, but it can't be fully, exhaustively explained.

After taking an unexpected turn into mysticism, my understanding of *Imagevirus* changed dramatically. I began to suspect that the letters A-I-D-S possess a hidden content. I am aware of some Kabalistic forms of meditation that instruct the seeker to imagine the letters of a word suspended in front of his own eyes. Then, by effort of will, the mystic moves the letters around in space, rearranges them, fits them inside each other, makes them do strange things to each other — all to produce images and signs.

AI

DS

In Hebrew, the name of God is transliterated into four letters as 'YHWH' or 'JHVH', and articulated as 'Jaweh' or 'Jehova', but we are forbidden to pronounce this name out loud. Was *Imagevirus* a Kabalistic meditation on the deeper cosmological significance of AIDS? I don't know, and it seems like a very far leap to make this connection. However, this thought experiment was very fruitful. It led me to the conclusion that to fully comprehend and appreciate *Imagevirus* you have to regard it as poetry.

### Word and Image

There are no necessary causal relations among the letters A-I-D-S. They are an acronym, a word formed from the initial letters of other words. They could stand for anything.

Anything  
I  
Determine  
Salient

All  
Immigrants  
Detained  
Somewhere

Acceptance  
Individuation  
Desire  
Success

I could rearrange the same letters into different words. AIDS becomes SAID, as in Gertrude Stein said...

Or DIAS:

Dias |'dēās; 'dē,ä sh | (also Diaz |'dēāsh |)  
Dias, Bartolomeu (c.1450—1500), Portuguese navigator and explorer. He was the first European to sail around the Cape of Good Hope 1488, thereby establishing a sea route from the Atlantic Ocean to Asia.<sup>52</sup>

Or IDAS. Not one person named Ida, but two, three, or four...

Looking at the *Imagevirus* logo, I see two levels of letters AI and DS. Eye above DiSSSSSSSSSS...

What compels me to read this as the acronym for a fatal disease? Habit, repetition. I am invred to seeing this letter combination as that disease. My disease. Your disease? Our disease?

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you.*<sup>53</sup>

The I who writes is also the I who reads, and both are the I who watches us. The author and the audience — their relation is not at all possible without the third vantage that watches the situation encompassing the first two. We are always three: no matter how hard one tries to avoid it, a triadic relation comes to stand for all relations. Poetry often plays with these varying positions to create constellations of experience. Consider for example the poem 'Anecdote of the Jar' (1919), by Wallace Stevens:

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.*

*It took dominion everywhere.  
The jar was grey and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*<sup>54</sup>

The subject 'I' places the object, in this instance a jar, against the ground named Tennessee. The state is a round shape in an untamed wilderness. The fourth line of the first stanza makes us see the context looking through the jar itself, as though it is made of

transparent glass. And then in the next stanza we see everything from the perspective of the jar itself, which is open and empty, a gasping maw swallowing air. In the third stanza it takes everything in, ingests all. This jar is a hungry, common thing — ‘grey and bare’ — without use. It finally all — the whole poem — comes to rest as a particular thing held within the proper noun of Tennessee. I and it and the place within — this is the triadic relation of each and every thing.

I said that you can’t fully grasp *Imagevirus* without an appreciation for poetry. And I guess I mean the word ‘poetry’ here in two senses. First, I am referring to the actual history of poems, a specific kind of ‘literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; poems collectively or as a genre of literature’. I am also thinking of the second definition of poetry given by *Oxford American Dictionary* on my laptop: ‘a quality of beauty and intensity of emotion regarded as characteristic of poems ... something regarded as comparable to poetry in its beauty’.

In both of these senses, poetry stands between knowing and being because the reader can’t distinguish the line, the rhythm and the words on the one hand from the story, the meaning, the significance on the other. Gertrude Stein taught us this in her essay, ‘Composition as Explanation’ (1926):

*Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series.*

*Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing. It is understood by this time that everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition.*

*Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same. Everything is not the same as the time when of the composition and the time in the composition is different. The composition is different, that is certain.*

*The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living in the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing they are doing. Nothing else is different, of that almost any one can be certain. The time when and the time of and the time in that composition is the natural phenomena of that composition and of that perhaps every one can be certain.<sup>55</sup>*

A-I-D-S. What do we make of the letters of a word transformed into a logo that spells nothing? It still signifies, and yet it fails to signify at the same time. Stein’s notion of time is both particular and general. She uses the word ‘time’ conditionally to refer to specific moments of time, and within the very same text she uses ‘time’ to mean flow, duration, history. She uses each and every sense of time within the composition. The word ‘composition’ in Stein’s essay also stands in for order, shape and duration — as well as all the constituent elements that go into order, shape and duration. Repetition is the key defining feature of the composition, beginning again and again. The repetition in Stein’s writing is serial: it recurs differently though each movement returns to the same place, to a beginning. Not *the* beginning, but a beginning. Habit is the preferred form of meaning in Stein; she writes with a sense of habit that echoes the daily rhythms of life, which are off-kilter and out of sync. She forces the reader to look at the accretion of word upon word,

sentence upon sentence, sentiment upon sentiment. All these accretions always sum up into one as a matter of regularity and regulation — one body of literature. *Imagevirus* is an accretion like that.

In this regard, it is interesting to compare and contrast *Imagevirus* with some examples of activist art that use a similar device. I have already mentioned the activist group Gran Fury, as well as the efforts of video activists. There were many others. In 1987, the *Silence=Death* poster wheatpasted all over New York City seemed to sum up everything that needed to be said about the AIDS epidemic. The poster shows the equation in white letters on a black ground, topped by a simple pink triangle — a symbol borrowed from the Nazi codifications for concentration camp prisoners (yellow stars for Jews and pink triangles for homosexuals).<sup>56</sup> The acronym AIDS does not appear in the slogan. Silence and AIDS seem diametrically opposed: one implies the other. Ronald Reagan, at the time President of the US, had not acknowledged the epidemic or the people who were dying from it. At the bottom of the poster in small print, an exhortation against silence could be read:

*Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable... Use your power... Vote... Boycott... Defend yourselves... Turn anger, fear, grief into action.*

‘Silence=Death’ was adopted as a slogan and logo for pins and T-shirts distributed by ACT UP, but the poster was originally produced by a small group of gay men before ACT UP was formed. The appearance of the poster was a harbinger of the militant phase of activism, when people in the communities hardest hit by AIDS began to consider tactics of protest and civil

disobedience. The Silence=Death Project was one among many collectives and collaboratives that formed. The enormous body of activist art produced by ACT UP and the groups attached to it was documented in Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston’s extraordinary study *AIDS Demographics* (1990). Crimp and Rolston understood the historically specific social determinations that gave rise to the collective ethos of AIDS activist art:

*Questions of authority, authorship and audience — and the ways in which all three are constructed through representation — have been central to postmodernist art, theory and criticism. The significance of so-called appropriation art, in which the artist forgoes the claim to original creation by appropriating already-existing images and objects, has been to show that the ‘unique individual’ is a kind of fiction, that our very selves are socially and historically determined through pre-existing images, discourses and events.*

*Young artists finding their place within the AIDS activist movement rather than the conventional art world have had reason to take these issues very seriously. Identity is understood by them to be, among other things, coercively imposed by perceived sexual orientation or HIV status; it is at the same time, willfully taken on in defiant declaration of affinity with the ‘others’ of AIDS: queers, women, Blacks, Latinos, drug users, sex workers...<sup>57</sup>*

Under the same pressures, General Idea took on the burdens of that very moment by consciously contextualising the problem within the history of art. They invented *Imagevirus* responding to the necessity of activism by drawing upon art-historical genealogies, insisting that the so-called art world include



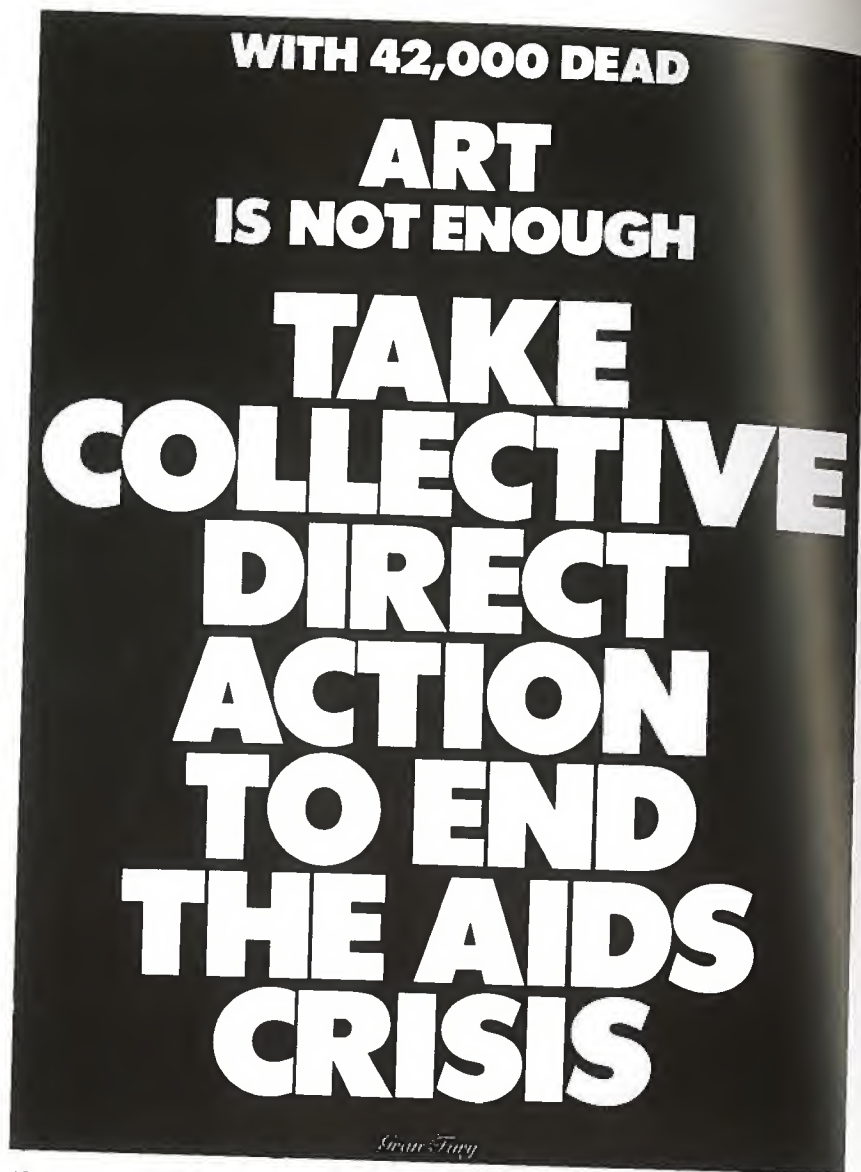
the concerns described by Crimp and Rolston — although many activist artists didn't see *Imagevirus* in that way. As an activist artist, I positioned myself outside the official art world, abandoning any relation to fine art and its genealogies. Many of us, particularly the younger artists not yet professionally established, felt that we had to make a choice between art and activism. The position of the gallery or museum seemed, to my mind at the time, aligned with the very same institutional apparatus enforcing a rule of silence about the most urgent issue of my life. With hindsight, it is easier to see how General Idea's efforts were consistent with and not opposed to the activist efforts with which I was aligned.

fierce pussy was (and still is) a self-identified group of lesbians whose street interventions asserted and testified to the vital role lesbians played in ACT UP and queer culture in general. Fighting persistent lesbian invisibility inside and outside Gay Liberation and AIDS activism, fierce pussy combined the sensibility of the individual artists involved, who fused Conceptual art, advertising and agitprop into their wheatpaste campaigns.<sup>58</sup> Often plain, large, black-and-white Xerox copies plastered to cover building walls, fierce pussy's posters from around 1993 challenged the viewer with, for example, a picture of a baby plus the word 'Dyke' (fig.44). Or, a simple text piece that read:

*What is a lesbian?  
your veterinarian  
your nurse  
your favourite movie star  
your lawyer  
your teacher  
your gynecologist  
your dentist  
your sanitation worker*



39. Robert Indiana,  
*LOVE*, 1966,  
acrylic on canvas, 182.5 × 182.5cm  
Indianapolis Museum of Art, James E.  
Roberts Fund © Morgan Art Foundation Ltd. /  
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
and DACS, London

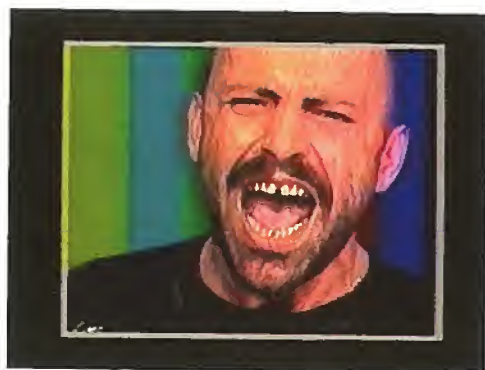


40. Gran Fury,  
*With 42,000 Dead Art Is Not Enough*,  
 1988, poster  
 Courtesy Gran Fury  
 Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division,  
 The New York Public Library, Astor,  
 Lenox and Tilden Foundations



41. Gran Fury,  
*RIOT*, 1988,  
 oil on canvas, 304.8 × 304.8cm  
 Courtesy Gran Fury  
 Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division,  
 The New York Public Library, Astor,  
 Lenox and Tilden Foundations





42. General Idea,  
*Shut the Fuck Up*, 1984,  
colour video with sound, 14min 7sec  
Produced by Talking Back to the  
Media, Amsterdam  
Courtesy the artists and Electronic  
Arts Intermix (EAI), New York



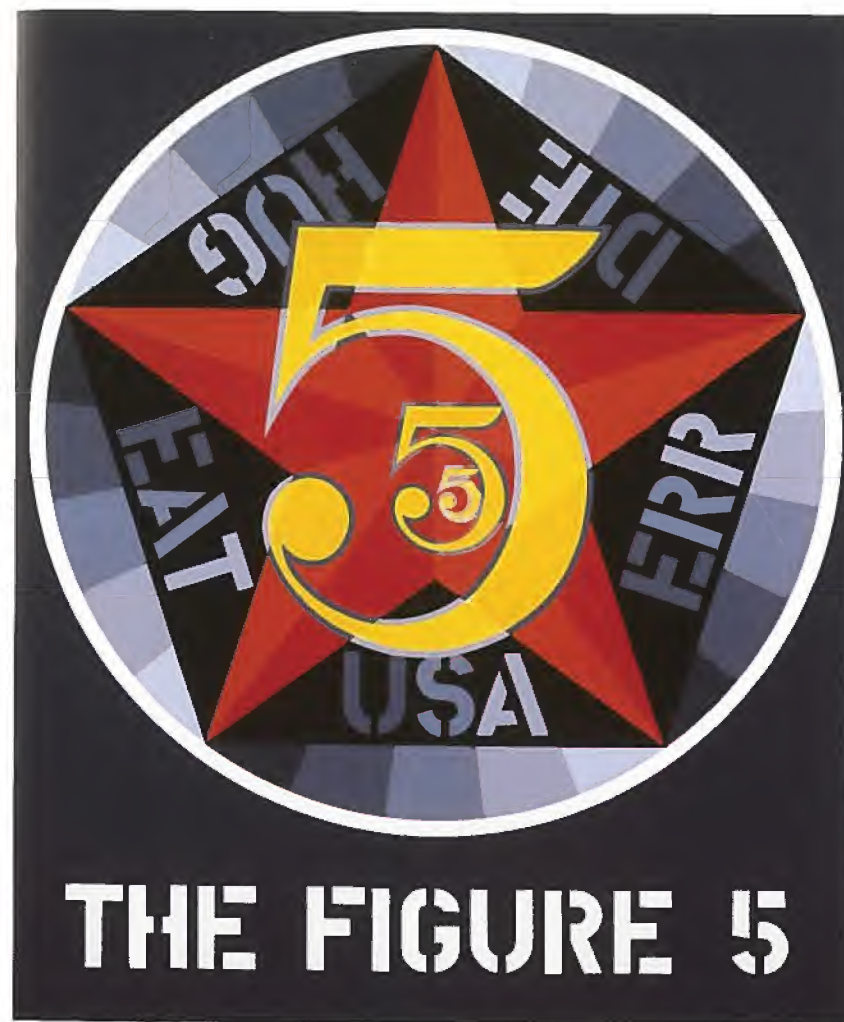
43. General Idea,  
*Untitled*, 1991,  
watercolour and coloured pencil  
on paper, 35.5 × 26.3cm  
Photograph: the artists





Dyke

44. fierce pussy,  
DYKE, 1991,  
photocopy on paper,  
43.2 × 27.9cm  
Courtesy the artists



45. Robert Indiana,  
*Figure Five*, 1963,  
oil on canvas, 152.4 × 127cm  
Photograph: Smithsonian American Art  
Museum © Morgan Art Foundation Ltd. /  
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
and DACS, London



46. Charles Demuth,  
*The Figure Five in Gold*, 1928,  
 oil on cardboard,  
 90.2 × 76.2cm

*your butcher*  
*your boss*  
*your sister*  
*your sergeant*  
*your psychiatrist*  
*your waitress*  
*your cop*  
*your receptionist*  
*your girlfriend*

As I am writing this book, there is a small summer exhibition in New York titled 'Tainted Love', named after the Soft Cell hit from the 1980s.<sup>59</sup> The young curators, Virginia Solomon and Steven Lam, have put together a show including, among other works, General Idea's five *Imagevirus* images designed to resemble vodka advertisements, Gran Fury's *RIOT* painting and stacks of fresh fierce pussy posters replicating their Xeroxes from the 1980s. The show is an effort to connect (queer) artists across a generational divide by making visible a kind of politics that takes love as its central motif.

In the catalogue essay, Solomon and Lam base their curatorial argument on the analysis of historical tensions between activist art and fine art, using General Idea and Gran Fury as two poles of a continuum.<sup>60</sup> By doing this, they demonstrate how General Idea's *Imagevirus* was political and how Gran Fury's painting was more than propaganda — it was art.

For Solomon and Lam, it is imperative to establish the political credentials of General Idea in defiance of the received idea that activism and art are opposed and mutually exclusive. By writing this book, I have been forced to examine that received idea and some of my own operative assumptions, pitting one against the other. At the same time, I am compelled to revisit my

long-abiding investment in poetry. It was that investment that prevented me then — as it does now — from accepting any fixed or stable division between activism and art.

In the 1980s poetry played an important role in gay culture among artists and AIDS activists. A collection of writings by the poet Adrienne Rich titled *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) was a significant point of reference for the artists in fierce pussy and the many lesbian activists working at the time. The title alone spoke volumes. In fact, it was ‘mandatory’ reading for all of us, not just lesbians.<sup>61</sup> The book’s title is the first line to the poem ‘Integrity’, in which Rich wrote about a kind of reconciliation between sentiments I can only begin to fathom now:

*Anger and tenderness: my selves  
And now I can believe they breathe in me  
as angels, not polarities.  
Anger and tenderness: the spider’s genius  
to spin and weave in the same action  
from her own body, anywhere —  
even from a broken womb*<sup>62</sup>

Groups of poets such as Gay Men of African Descent addressed AIDS directly in their work, which they published in anthologies like *In the Life* (1986), edited by Joseph Beam, or literary journals like *Other Countries*.<sup>63</sup> Essex Hemphill (1957–1995) was a gifted poet whose work captured the predicaments of gay life, particularly but not exclusively for men of colour.

*If in my substance  
it could be conveyed  
how little I give a damn about tomorrow,  
the length of my trousers,*

*the circumcision I didn’t agree to,  
the daily shave, the score, the mythology.  
Would they be shocked to discover  
contempt clinging to my cells like algae.*

*Nuisance: dying to assuage insanity.  
Religious fervour. Moral pandemonium.  
The unexpected lurks near the hours  
you thought private.  
What will you accept  
in exchange for your silence?  
What life do you want  
for one more day?*<sup>64</sup>

The line ‘contempt clinging to my cells like algae’ is a form of condensation that productively employs ambiguity to signify a number of associations. It calls to mind the virus that infects cells, attributes contempt to that infection, implies that the active agent, the virus, clings, forms an attachment, calling to mind an erotic image. Infection is bound up with feelings of loathing and despair, all wrapped up in the arms of another — feelings that register on a cellular level.

Conceptualisations of illness resemble descriptions of affective states. I often think that illness is the model for my understanding of emotion. Intense feelings seem to come from the outside, beyond my volition. They happen to me, and I have to recover from them to achieve an equilibrium.

The artwork of David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) tapped into the rage-fuelling AIDS activism and gave vent to the murderous fantasies of those of us who were affected by it. Wojnarowicz proudly associated himself with the figure of nineteenth-century French bad-boy poet Arthur Rimbaud, with punk music and



with the downtown East Village bohemia of which he was a significant figure. His work existed in many media — painting, drawing, silkscreen, photography, film, performance, writing. Consider this excerpt from his collection of texts, *Close to the Knives* (1991), which continues to inspire many younger artists, including my students:

*I wake up every morning in this killing machine called America and I'm carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg and there's a thin line between the inside and the outside a thin line between thought and action and that line is simply made up of blood and muscle and bone and I'm waking up more and more from daydreams of tipping Amazonian blow darts in 'infected blood' and spitting them at the exposed necklines of certain politicians or government health-care officials or those thinly disguised walking swastikas that wear religious garments over their murderous intentions or those rabid strangers parading against AIDS clinics in the nightly news suburbs there's a thin line a very thin line between the inside and the outside and I've been looking all my life at the signs surrounding us in the media or on peoples' lips.<sup>65</sup>*

Wojnarowicz's work was not a practical tool for direct action, particularly when he advocated dipping blow darts in infected blood to shoot into the necks of our enemies.

Also in 1991, Semiotext(e) published a small green paperback titled *Not Me*, by the poet Eileen Myles. That book and the poet herself seemed ubiquitous on the Lower East Side of New York City. I choose a fragment of a poem to quote here, not because it has any direct connection to New York or AIDS, but because it states a position about the relation of sentiment to medium. It is from a poem titled 'Public Television':

*If you  
haven't called me  
that does  
mean some-  
thing. That  
I should  
mind my  
own business  
the new  
way to  
be. There  
is of course  
a mass media,  
the thing  
that everyone  
sees that  
everyone knows  
what does  
everyone  
know, do  
they care?  
Does it look  
okay. Then  
there's the  
little private  
world of  
feelings, let's  
call that access.*

*I don't care  
how it  
looks, or  
if we're  
watched by*

how many  
billion viewers,  
see, I am concerned  
with having  
the important  
spot in  
your heart  
and a channel  
to mine  
I want  
this beam  
to be  
long and strong  
and true.  
Is it?<sup>66</sup>

*Imagevirus* is difficult to situate in relation to fierce pussy, Essex Hemphill, David Wojnarowicz or Eileen Myles. It was not expressive or personal. To the contrary, it was impersonal. It was neither lyrical nor didactic, and it was most unsympathetic. It was a cold piece of anti-humanism, vacant in its refusal to mean anything, unclear who it was meant to address. At first glance, the *AIDS* logo was a crude joke, seemingly the work of a homophobe or cynic. It didn't appear to be the work of a collective, the work of gay men, people with HIV or poets. General Idea turned the acronym AIDS, the name of a fatal disease causing an uncontrollable epidemic, into a puzzle. The group steadfastly refused clarity of intention, message, audience and emotion, and during a time of 'war', *Imagevirus* occupied huge sections of valuable cultural real estate with nonsense.

The Canadian artists newly transplanted to New York took the most passive-aggressive stance possible. They entered the fray of US-AIDS-art-politics and made a hugely significant, unique

contribution because they drained the meaning out of the letters constituting the acronym AIDS precisely at the moment when there was a terrible battle over the meaning of the disease itself. But AIDS has no inherent meaning, it doesn't make sense. The AIDS activist movement was fighting to overturn homophobic interpretations, racist sentiments and all kinds of prejudices attached to AIDS by a moralistic establishment deciding public policy according to its own narrow, Christian definition of values. The political significance of *Imagevirus* rested in its refusal to assign any meaning or value to AIDS by amplifying the general state of mind fostered by a commercial culture moored in conservative religious morality.

### Poetry and Painting

To understand *Imagevirus* today, we must labour hard to tie the work of General Idea directly to the point where poetry and visual art consort in modern art history. Tracing that genealogy leads the analysis back to Robert Indiana and the *LOVE* logo that General Idea appropriated for its *AIDS* emblem. *Imagevirus* was remarkably consistent with the strategies original to the art of Robert Indiana, and more importantly to his predecessors in twentieth-century North American painting and poetry.

Indiana made a painting titled *Figure Five* (1963; fig.45), which is a direct reference to Charles Demuth's painting *The Figure Five in Gold* (1928; fig.46). Demuth is one of the most important abstractionists of the early twentieth century in the US, and *The Figure Five in Gold* is a blazon of North American modernism, a staple of art-history classes. The painting itself was inspired by 'The Great Figure' (1921), a poem written by another towering figure of North American modernism, William Carlos Williams:

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
fire truck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.<sup>67</sup>

Demuth's painting is a portrait of Williams (the painting contains the names 'Bill' and 'Carlos'). Situated historically at the nexus of modern poetry and modern painting, *The Figure Five in Gold* stands as an example of the respective, non-exclusive commitments of two media to both word and image. It is a synthesis of the seen, the heard and the spoken, an extension of language across boundaries of form, a recognition that a word is an image and an image is part of language. Modern American artists understood the synthesis of word and image as an already established fact of modern advertising in the early part of the twentieth century. Indiana's Pop art take on the matter in *Figure Five* extended the concerns of Demuth and Williams into the switched-on electric media landscape of the 1960s, when every open channel — including newspapers, radio and television — broadcast imperatives like 'EAT' and 'DIE', commands signalled to passers-by like loud incessant alarms.

And what about *LOVE*? Who knows what love means anyway? Is love a universal feeling that everyone experiences as a powerful attachment to all others, a oneness of humankind?

Or is love a limit point where language completely fails and the individual is thrust upon himself to face the very boundaries of his own skin? When I look into the eyes of another, do I see myself or someone just like me, returning the same intense feelings of unity and mutual recognition? Or do I discern something incomprehensible about the other standing there in front of me, something completely foreign to my own innermost confusion? Love is a mixture of contradictions: it is both identity and alienation, platonic and erotic, generous and greedy.

Did love lead to AIDS? Of course not. There are no causal links, only resemblances and inferences. Certainly, AIDS, with its erotic components, enfolds love and its complexity. And certainly, by choosing Indiana's *LOVE*, General Idea dragged along an entire art-historical genealogy that included Duchamp, Demuth and others.

When I spoke to AA about General Idea's working meetings, he described a group of intimate associates tied together by decades of shared experience. By the end of their run, when Felix and Jorge died in 1994, the three artists had lived and worked together for twenty-five years. Over that length of time, their relationships were by turns familial, sexual, erotic, incestuous, intellectual and creative. They were communards, combattants, co-conspirators, allies, roommates, friends, brothers and sisters. I am sure they experienced love, jealousy, rivalry, loyalty, betrayal and forgiveness. Their intersubjective three-way was deep and complex, functioning as a single organism in which they would finish each other's sentences.

So, when Felix or whoever had the idea for an *AIDS* logo based on Robert Indiana's *LOVE*, the manifold significance of the idea was symphonic in its intricacy. And the three artists

couldn't have known, they couldn't have been in control of all the associations that I bring to bear on *Imagevirus* over twenty years later. Still, all that I have marshalled in this book can be legitimately claimed by the project as part of the larger evolving historical context that defines *Imagevirus*.

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AA said that laughter was key to General Idea's process, and I can see that. Humour is a key component of poetics — we laugh when we reach the end of language. The crude joke that love leads to AIDS harbours a truth and disentangles that truth simultaneously. While love and all the kinds of attachments that occur in its name arise during an epidemic that continues to kill millions of people, there can be no causal relation established between love and a virus. One does not choose whom to fall in love with, love just happens and then you have to deal with it. The glance across a room. The sinking feeling in the chest. The hard on.

The virus doesn't care. AIDS doesn't have a soul or a consciousness. Love and AIDS are not the same and yet they are radically connected by an overarching feature of existence: chance. An artist can't control all of the potential meanings of a work of art. Yet, by methods of composition, he or she can create a context for varying and contending interpretations of an artwork. *Imagevirus*, with all its navigations through the art world and beyond into public spaces, by its consistency of format and design, produced a fabulously rich domain within which the interconnected problems of knowing about AIDS and living with AIDS could be faced together as one problem.



1

For an account of the various forms of *Imagevirus*, see Allan Schwartzman's untitled essay in *General Idea: The AIDS Project*, Toronto: The Gershon Iskowitz Foundation, 1989, pp.5—15. The logo was first produced for an 'Art against AIDS' benefit sale that took place in New York in June 1987. In November, posters of it were wheat-pasted around lower Manhattan, and in January 1988, as part of an exhibition at Artspace in San Francisco, the walls of one gallery were covered with the posters, as was a billboard at a corner café. That May, posters appeared all over Toronto: in the art and gay districts, on a window at the Art Gallery of Ontario, at The Power Plant, the Pages bookstore, gallery YYZ and in the lobby of the MacDonald Block. They appeared in Hartford, Connecticut and Tourcoing, France in October; in Berlin in December (for the exhibition 'Vollbild', including billboards and publicity kiosks); and in Atlanta, Georgia the following January. Before that, in June 1988, a series of six 8-foot and twelve 2-foot square paintings (dimensions commonly used by Mark Rothko) were exhibited at Koury Wingate Gallery in New York. The logo also appeared on the cover of *Ontario Dentist* in November 1988 (see *Ontario Dentist: Journal of the Ontario Dental Association*, vol.65, no.9, November 1988), and published as a series of stamps by *Parkett* magazine that same year. In 1989 it was placed in every second carriage of the New York City subway system, as well as on a Spectacolor sign in Times Square. In 1991 it became a large metal public sculpture in the streets of Hamburg. From then until 1994, it appeared in other magazines (as inserts, adverts and covers), and on T-shirts, rings, videos and scarves.

2

Curators Steven Lam and Virginia Solomon included five photographs from the *Imagevirus* series in a group exhibition called 'Tainted Love' at La MaMa Galleria in New York (4 June—28 June 2009). As I discuss later in this book, Lam and Solomon attempted to recuperate *Imagevirus* as a political work of art by placing it alongside past and current examples of activist art.

3

The virus that causes AIDS, HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), can be transmitted through exchanges of semen or blood through sex, sharing non-sterilised hypodermic needles and from mother to child in birth.

4

I have in mind the myth of Diana and Acteon, as told by Ovid and reinterpreted by Titian, and also 'Liebestod' (translated from the German as 'Love Death'), the title of the dramatic aria from Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1856—59), based on a story from German medieval poetry. The death drive (*Todestrieb*), according to Sigmund Freud, is derived from the cellular memory of a formless state preceding the emergence of multi-cellular organisms. See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* (trans. James Strachey), New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000.

5

See Magnus Hirschfeld, *Homosexuality of Men and Women* (trans. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash), Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000. On the history of post-War Gay Liberation, see John D'Emelio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Community in the United States, 1940—1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

6

For a thorough account of General Idea's beginnings, see the catalogue for the exhibition 'The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968—1975', curated by Fern Bayer at the Art Gallery of Ontario (8 October 1997—11 January 1998). In addition to reading Bayer's research and the essays collected in the exhibition catalogue, I conducted my own conversation with AA Bronson on 6 January 2009, and this is the primary source for my account. See F. Bayer (ed.), *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968—1975*, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997.

7

General Idea became a three-artist collective in 1973.

8

Jorge Zontal was born in 1944, Felix Partz in 1945 and AA Bronson in 1946.

9

At the time of going to press, General Idea's website lists three current exhibitions: 'General Idea: Works 1967—1975', at Esther Schipper, Berlin; 'General Idea 1989—1994', at Galerie Mai 36, Zürich; and 'The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion', at The Art Gallery at York University, Toronto, recreating two exhibitions from the 1970s. See <http://www.aabronson.com/art/gi.org/index.htm> (last accessed on 26 April 2010).

10

See, for example, Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007.

11

See Douglas Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1988; Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999; Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002; and Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

12

The LOVE image was first designed by Indiana for a Christmas card commissioned by New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1964. The exhibition of the definitive LOVE motif occurred when a 1966 painting with the image was shown at the Stable Gallery, New York in the spring of 1966. See Susan Elizabeth Ryan, 'Eternal Love', in Fronia W. Simpson (ed.), *Love and the American Dream: The Art of Robert Indiana* (exh. cat.), Portland: Portland Museum of Art, 1999, p.85. According to a note in *General Idea Editions 1967—1995*, General Idea's AIDS logo is 'based on Robert Indiana's LOVE painting of 1966'. Barbara Fischer (ed.), *General Idea Editions 1967—1995* (exh. cat.), Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery, 2003, p.172.

13

The New York Public Library holds the archive of ACT UP: <http://www.actupny.org/documents/nypplPR.html> (last accessed on 26 April 2010). Interviews with members of ACT UP are being recorded and preserved by the ACT UP Oral History Project, available at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org> (last accessed on 26 April 2010).

14

See Antonin Artaud, 'The Theater and Cruelty', *The Theater and Its Double* (trans. Mary Coraline Richards), New York: Grove Press, 1958, p.85.

15

'The word is now a virus.' William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, New York: Grove Press, 1994, p.49. Laurie Anderson promoted this idea in her song 'Language Is a Virus' (1986).

16

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, New York: New Directions, 2006, p.119.

17

W.S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, New York: Grove Press, 1964, p.48.

18

W.S. Burroughs, 'Introduction, Deposition: A Testimony Concerning Sickness', *Naked Lunch*, New York: Grove Weidendfeld, 1959, pp.xxxvii—xlvi.

19

*Ibid.*, p.xxxix.

20

*Ibid.*, p.xli.

21

*Ibid.*, p.xxxvii.

22

'No one has given much thought to building a qualitative mathematics — My formula saw to that...' W.S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, *op. cit.*, p.79.

23

Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress*, Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006, p.191.

24

Conversation with AA Bronson, *op. cit.*

25

Definition from *The New Oxford American Dictionary* software that comes standard on my laptop.

26

Conversation with AA Bronson, *op. cit.*

27

G. Stein, *What Happened: A Play*, in *A Stein Reader* (ed. Ulla E. Dydo), Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993, p.272.

28

W.S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, New York: Grove Press, 1966, p.31.

29

Peter Wollen, 'Notes from the Underground', *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*, London and New York: Verso, 1993, p.167.

30

AA Bronson, 'Myth As Parasite/Image as Virus, General Idea's Bookshelf from 1967—1975', in F. Bayer (ed.), *The Search for the Spirit*, *op. cit.*, p.17.

31

Jerry Falwell linked AIDS to God's wrath on a number of occasions. For one instance, see 'Dr. Koop Warns of Spread of AIDS', *The New York Times*, 20 January 1987, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/20/us/dr-koop-warns-of-spread-of-aids.html?scp=7&sq=Jerry%20Fallwell%20AIDS&st=cse> (last accessed on 26 April 2010). The artist group Gran Fury quoted Falwell in their 1987 installation *Let the Record Show*, at the New Museum, New York. See D. Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, *op. cit.*, p.35.

32

See Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

33

Conversation with AA Bronson, *op. cit.*

34

See <http://www.aabronson.com/art/Negative/MCAframe.htm> (last accessed on 26 April 2010). This web project by AA Bronson was published in conjunction with the exhibition 'Negative Thoughts', held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (27 January—22 April 2001). A book of the same name was also published in 2001 by the Museum of Contemporary Art.

35

Their individual histories and the facts and fictions of their origins as individuals and as a group are documented in F. Bayer, *The Search for the Spirit*, *op. cit.*

36

Gran Fury, founded in 1988, was one of the smaller associations or 'affinity groups' that existed within ACT UP. Gran Fury took its name from the Plymouth Gran Fury, the car used by the New York Police Department at the time.

37

Under pressure from Senator Jesse Helms, government financing for AIDS education was barred in 1986; the ban was extended in 1987 to include any programmes that 'promote, encourage or condone homosexual activities'. The Federal ruling was overturned in 1992. See Robert D. McFadden, 'Judge Overturns U.S. Rule Blocking "Offensive" Educational Material on AIDS', *The New York Times*, 12 May 1992, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/12/nyregion/judge-overturns-us-rule-blocking-offensive-educational-material-on-aids.html?scp=2&sq=Helms%20AIDS%20education&st=cse> (last accessed on 26 April 2010).

38

See Bruce Lambert, '10 Seized in Demonstration as They Offer New Needles', *The New York Times*, 7 March 1990, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/07/nyregion/10-seized-in-demonstration-as-they-offer-new-needles.html> (last accessed on 26 April 2010).

39

Conversation with AA Bronson, *op. cit.*

40

*Ibid.*

41

*Ibid.*

42

At the invitation of the Public Art Fund, artists were offered 20-second spots on a Spectacolor sign in Times Square. *Messages to the Public*, as they were called, commented on political and social events, and ran for nine years beginning in 1980. David Hammons, Keith Haring and Jenny Holzer were among the participants. See [http://www.publicartfund.org/pafweb/projects/00/r1st\\_p\\_s00\\_release.html](http://www.publicartfund.org/pafweb/projects/00/r1st_p_s00_release.html) (last accessed on 3 February 2010).

43

'Imagevirus: Times Square', *Canadian Art*, vol.11, no.3, Fall/September 1994, p.15.

44

Parts I and II are available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2gVJ1IRxA0>; Part III at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fTRHkDsMnk&feature=related> (last accessed on 26 April 2010).

45

AA Bronson, 'Myth As Parasite/Image As Virus, General Idea's Bookshelf 1967—1975', *op. cit.*, quoting W.S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, *op. cit.*, p.20.

46

This is a reworking of line 360 of 'The Waste Land': 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?' T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1988, p.43.

47

W.S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, *op. cit.*, p.103, quoting T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', *op. cit.*, p.30. Eliot is actually quoting a line from the libretto of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

48

T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', *op. cit.*, p.46.

49

*Ibid.*, p.41.

- 50  
‘The Fire Sermon’, in Henry Clarke Warren (ed. and trans.), *Buddhism in Translation: Passages Selected from the Buddhist Sacred Books*, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003, pp.351—53. Originally published in volume 3, issue 8 of *The Harvard Oriental Series* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922).
- 51  
See *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (trans. A.C. Spearing), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2002.
- 52  
*The New Oxford American Dictionary*, *op. cit.*
- 53  
T.S. Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, *op. cit.*, lines 360—63, p.43.
- 54  
Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 1954, available at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15743> (last accessed on 26 April 2010).
- 55  
G. Stein, ‘Composition as Explanation’, *The Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (ed. Carl Van Vechten), New York: Vintage Books, 1962, p.516.
- 56  
See Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1988.
- 57  
Douglas Crimp with Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demographics*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1990, p.18.
- 58  
fierce pussy was intensely active in New York City from 1991 to 1995, when they produced posters, stickers and T-shirts that they distributed throughout the city, always with a low-tech and low-budget approach. The group continues to make installations and exhibitions, and its core members include Pam Brandt, Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Alison Froling, Zoe Leonard, Suzanne Wright and Carrie Yamaoka.
- 59  
The exhibition included works by Catherine Lord, Charles Lum, fierce pussy, General Idea, Gran Fury, Ivan Monforte, Jose Luis Cortes, Luis Camnitzer, Matt Lipps and Wu Ingrid Tsang, as well as contributions to the catalogue by Emily Roysdon and the author.
- 60  
“‘Tainted Love” entangles the past with the present, not only through the juxtaposition of historic and contemporary works but also through the inclusion of work whose internal logic points to its own simultaneous historicity and

continued communicability. The projects in the show draw upon the systems of sense-making within contemporary culture — language, the archive, identity, community — making them strange while recruiting them to construct a different set of systems that allow for multiple ways of being and knowing within the field of culture. These procedures constitute an intensely political intervention, and by insisting on them as a radical redefinition of love that is neither aim nor self-actualisation, the exhibition claims that love is a fertile and viable tactic for social change.’ Virgina Solomon and Steven Lam, ‘LOVE/AIDS/RIOT/LOVE?’, in V. Solomon and S. Lam (ed.), *Tainted Love* (exh. cat.), New York: Visual AIDS and La MaMa Galleria, 2009, p.5.

61  
Adrienne Rich, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far, Poems 1978—1981*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993.

62  
*Ibid.*, p.8.

63  
See Joseph Beam (ed.), *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986. See also Donald Woods et al., *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices, A First Volume*, New York: Other Countries, 1988.

64  
Essex C. Hemphill, ‘Overtones’ (1987), in Martin Humphries (ed.), *Tongues Untied: Poems by Dirg Aaab-Richards, Craig G. Harris, Essex Hemphill, Isaac Jackson, Assotto Sainte*, London: Gay Men’s Publishers and Alyson Publications, 1987. Also available at <http://www.colorado.edu/journals/standards/V5N2/HEMPHILL/hemphill2.html> (last accessed on 3 February 2010).

65  
David Wojnarowicz, ‘DO NOT DOUBT THE DANGEROUSNESS OF THE 12-INCH POLITICIAN’, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1991, p.161.

66  
Eileen Myles, ‘Public Television’, *Not Me*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1991, pp.115—16.

67  
William Carlos Williams, ‘The Great Figure’, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I, 1909—1939* (ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan), New York: New Directions, 1986, p.174.